

A Light Novel

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# Semicolon

Daniel Alexander



### Takumi "Toka" (15)

Birth day : April 2

Height : 168 cm (5'6")

Favorite things :

- Reading
- Black Coffee (He forces himself to like it bitter)



### Dachi "Noodles"

Birth day : June 14

Height : 165 cm (5'5")

Favorite things :

- Old arcade games
- Trying new things



### Shirakawa "Shira" (15)

Birth day : October 15

Height : 182 cm (6'0")

Favorite things :

- Cats
- Salted egg yolk chicken



## **Chapter 1**

### **Responsibility and Noodles**

“I want to become an astronaut!”

“I want to become an engineer that can build giant robots.”

“I want to be a successful entrepreneur!”

Those were all the things that I’ve heard from everyone in my class at sixth grade elementary school. Really high ambitions.

“What about you, Taka? What do you want to be when you’re a grown up?”, the teacher asked me, in front of the whole class.

“I guess I want to be a doctor,” was what I said in front of the whole class. My friends looked at me with spark in their eyes.

As the final class of the day had ended, I walked home with my friends, Hiro and Leo.

“You want to become a doctor?! That’s so cool! Maybe one day I would visit your—”

“I don’t really want to be a doctor,” I cut off Hiro as he spoke.

Both of them looked at me, puzzled. The truth was, I don't have things figured out. I never had. I never knew what I wanted to be when I am older. That response in class was just something I threw out so that the moment would pass. I never get why people want to grasp the sky, trying to reach the greatest heights, when living was already hard enough.

"Then what do you actually want to be?" Leo asked me.

The question landed on me so heavily. My mouth opened, but I didn't mutter a single word. I could feel their curious gaze, fixated onto me, yet an answer never came by. Suddenly I was conscious of my every step, and every sound it makes. The sound of our footsteps filled the silence I had left hanging.

Hiro tried to keep the conversation forward and laughed it off. "Hahaha, maybe I'll be your boss one day then! I'm going to be a big boss in a company, and I'll make the employees do lots of work so I can enjoy my burger!"

"If all you do is just eat burger, nobody would want to work for you, *fat ass!*" Leo replied to Hiro.

Hiro's face looks red, as if he's about to explode.

They started arguing a lot, while I would just quietly walk beside them.

I remembered that day clearly because of that one simple question. *What do you actually want to be?* I never gave them an answer.

\* \* \*

That question had followed me through the years, through countless lessons and classes. “Doctor” became my default safe, respectable, and conversation-ending response. Hiro and Leo were the only ones to care enough to push for the truth.

Now, four years later, I’m standing in front of a new school. Different city, different uniform, and yet the same empty feeling when people asked about my future. At least this time, nobody knew me well enough to ask.

High school had just started. There was an entrance exam, but I didn’t talk to anyone. Some kids already have their own friend groups by the time the entrance exam ended, and were now talking amongst themselves. The class hadn’t started yet, so I thought that I should just study so I could get a small head start.

It was a big classroom. The lights were making it very comfortable to read. The air inside was cool and comfortable, with the sounds of . . . everything but books.

The class that had only 27 people felt like an army of 300 Spartans, on their way to war. Crumpled pieces of paper flew like arrows from left to right, right to left. The whiteboard was filled with random scribbles and a huge heart, with the middle of it saying “Yuki loves Gen”.

*For God’s sake*, this is a classroom. Why were they so loud? I couldn’t stand loud noises like this.

“Shhh! Everyone, keep your voices down! The teacher’s not even here yet!”

That voice came from the front row of the class, just right across my own desk. A boy. His hair was short and white, just tidying up his notes as he said it to the rest of the class. His tone was sharp, yet calm and composed. Some of the kids on the back of the class quieted down for a moment, but the noise quickly returned. He let out a small sigh and went back to tidying his notes.

Responsible guy, I thought. He looked reliable, maybe someone who was fit enough to become the class rep.

Suddenly I heard really fast footsteps coming from behind me. It was a guy with his shirt untucked. His uniform was unbuttoned, revealing his red t-shirt saying “NOODLES”. His hair looked like he couldn’t decide on what to dye it to—half black, half yellow, and really messy.

“Hey! Sorry for being loud earlier!” he clapped his hands together, and then bowed. He pulled out a small chocolate bar from his pocket, then put it on the responsible guy’s desk. The responsible guy put his arm on his chair, turning his body to Noodles, looking puzzled.

One day into high school and I’m witnessing bribery.

“What is this for?”, the responsible guy asked, his brows slightly raised.

“It’s a peace offering!” Noodles grinned and patted the responsible guy’s shoulders. He then followed it by bending forwards and giving a thumbs up with both hands.

“Sweet things make people happy, right? *limited edition* chocolate!”

He leaned slightly, his eyes were everywhere but the responsible guy, his palm on the side of his mouth. He lowered his voice as if he was telling a sacred secret, but loud enough for me to hear. The responsible guy’s face still puzzled.

“It’s the last one in the store. Did I mention that it’s *li-mi-  
ted e-di-tion?*”, he dragged out the last words dramatically in slow motion. The responsible guy chuckled as a response.

This whole exchange was so strange that before I knew it, a word just slipped from my mouth. “Noodles”.

The both of them turned towards me in unison. The class that was so loud at the time, felt so quiet for me. It was as if when they turned, I could hear an audible dragged stone sound. *Crap*. I said it too loud, didn't I?!

“. . . is something I would eat for lunch today,” I tried to play it off.

Noodles' face lit up. “Whoa, thinking about lunch?! This early in the morning?! You are a very futuristic person!”

“Visionary,” the responsible guy corrected.

“Visionary, yes! The world needs people like him!” Noodles pointed his thumb at me. He didn't seem to realize that his red t-shirt had that bold white word that says Noodles.

He put out his hand with a big grin on his face. “Daichi!” he said. “Don't forget it, dude! That's me!”.

“Takumi, but you can call me Taka,” I replied to him. As I shook his hand, I noticed that his palms were calloused and rough. I suppose this suits him, he might just be a very sporty guy from the looks of it.

“Ah, and this guy right here! Taka, meet . . .” he trailed off, realizing he never knew the responsible guy's name this whole time.



“Shirakawa, but you can just call me Shira,” the responsible guy answered with a warm smile. I have to say he was very patient, dealing with someone like Noodles.

“Shira and Taka,” Noodles placed his hands on our shoulders. “You both are very diligent, huh? Sitting on the front row seats.”

“Hey, well, you paid for school. Might as well listen to the teacher,” Shira answered. Noodles nodded, his eyes closed and his arms crossed.

The classroom door then slides open, sending a ripple through the classroom.

“Everyone, to your seats!” The teacher walked in, carrying a huge stack of papers under one arm, and a laptop on the other. The class of 300 Spartans was suddenly filled with sounds of moving table and moving chairs, everyone hurrying to their seats.

“Hey, nice meeting you both! Let’s talk again later when we’re at the cafeteria!” Noodles tapped both of our shoulders with a big grin on his face.

Shira smiled at him and quickly slid the chocolate bar in his bag. “Thanks for the chocolate, Daichi.”

Noodles went to sit at the very back of the class, his chair almost tipping over when he went to sit on it.

“He really does stick out, huh?” Shira laughed while whispering to me, loud enough for me to listen clearly.

I nodded. I looked back to see Noodles with his tongue out, writing something on his book. He was probably writing his name on his book or crafting the perfect autograph.

That’s when it hit me. The two people that I’ve just met were some of the people who stood out without even trying. Shira being the responsible person who keeps the class in check, and Noodles with this unmatched energy. Me? If this was a drama, I would probably just be villager C. No, I probably wouldn’t even have a speaking role. Maybe the tree.

“Alright, let’s begin, everyone,” the teacher voiced out through the sudden silence.

The teacher looked at the scribbled whiteboard, then sighs while pinching his nose bridge. He quickly erases the whiteboard. “My name is Mr. Sage, and I’ll be your homeroom teacher,” he continued while writing his name on the whiteboard.

“Okay, now it’s time for all of you to introduce yourselves! Starting with the person on the far left! I want you to introduce your name, and your ambition!”

Here we go again with the ambitions. Should I just say doctor again? What should I say? Maybe I should just be

honest. I don't know what I want to do in the future. What if I just say that I needed to go to the toilet? What if I just—

“Okay, now you. Stand up and introduce yourself.” Before I knew it, the two students before me had already introduced themselves. I suppose I had already dug my grave when I picked the front row seat.

“Uh. Hi. My name's Takumi. Taka's fine. My ambition is . . . to survive high school.” My face stayed stoic and serious, but my palms betrayed me. Despite my serious face, I'm cringing so hard inside. Laughter soon follows in the classroom, but in the midst of it all I heard Noodles from the back scream, “Hell yeah, dude! The truest words of a warrior!” while he's also clapping. Shira gave me a supportive nod.

After I sat back down, it was Shira's turn to introduce himself.

“My name is Shirakawa. Just Shira is fine. My ambition is to become a teacher.” He said it clearly without any stutter. He gave a polite smile. From the looks of it, I think Mr. Sage was impressed by the answer; his eyebrows were raised then soon his proud smile followed. When he looked at me, I simply gave him a nod of approval.

Names and ambitions got thrown around after a while. By the tenth person I had already lost track of their names. Become a businessman, become a teacher, become rich,

become famous. Yeah, sure. My brain only snapped back to reality when it was Noodles' turn.

"YO! My name is Daichi! Ah, hm. Ambition, eh? I wanna work as a ramen shop owner, I guess! So I can help my grandpa! By the way, Mr. Sage, just looking at your tie, I know you get lots of love." The class laughed, not in a mean way. They were laughing because Noodles really got that good energy that makes anyone want to laugh with him. Heck, what was going on with Mr. Sage's face? *He's blushing?!*

Before the class could settle down, the girl with long ash blonde hair next to Noodles stood up. She smoothed her skirt, her movements careful and neat.

"Um . . . Hello. My name is Mana," she said softly. Her voice was very small, yet the classroom quieted down to listen. "My ambition is . . . to be kind, and support the people I care about." The class quietly clapped to support her.

She gave a small smile towards Noodles after ending her intro. Noodles instantly sat up straighter, looking very happy. "That's me! That's my girl!" Noodles shouted. The class bursts into laughter again, even louder this time. Mana's cheeks turned pink, but instead of scolding Noodles, she gave him a head pat and sat back down.

I wouldn't normally remember people like her, especially because I already forgot the student next to Shira, but Mana? Hard to forget when Noodles exploded during her turn.

As the class finished introducing themselves, Mr. Sage came up with something. "We will be doing a group activity!" he said. "Gather in a group of 4 people. One group will have only three people."

"Hey, Taka. Let's group up, yeah? We still need two more people . . . I'll try asking Daichi," Shira said with a small smile. I just gave a quick nod. It was always like that, and it was easier that way. Decisions were better if it was not mine to choose anyway.

I quietly sat on my chair, watching Shira talk with Noodles. When they talked, it feels as if they had known each other for more than ten minutes. They laughed, then did a fist bump together. Not long after, he suddenly glanced my way. Our eyes met for half a second before he grinned wide.

Next thing I knew, they were walking towards me; Shira with his calm smile and Noodles with his wide grin kept.

"Well, whaddya know, maybe we were the three musketeers in our past lives," he shrugged while grinning.

Shira chuckled. "What about Mana? Is she joining us too?"

“Mana? Oh, my girlfriend! Nah, she’s with a different group. Y’know . . . Being the only girl stuck in a group of mostly boys are kinda intimidating.” He put his hand on his shoulder, but his grin didn’t fade.

“She’s your girlfriend?” Shira asked curiously, looking somewhat surprised.

“Wh—yeah! Of course? Dude, that sounds like an insult”

I leaned back in my chair, just letting their energy spill over me. It felt easier like this, just quietly going with the flow.

“Hey, what about you, Taka? You’ve been quiet! Tell us about yourself,” Shira calmly asked me. I had completely forgotten. The only exchange I had with the two was just “Noodles” from earlier.

“Eh . . . Me?” I answered while scratching my neck. “Well, there’s nothing interesting with me, really.”

“What?! Don’t you say that! You have been a very mysteriously quiet and a somewhat cool person. COOL!” Noodles exclaimed, pointing his finger at me, inches away from my eyes.

“So, what about your family?” Shira asked.

“Family . . . Me and my parents move a lot.”

“Move a lot?” They asked me the same question at the same time.

“Yeah. We moved a lot. Every time I get used to a new place, we’d already be in a new place. My parents weren’t home much anyways, so it’s not like the house ever felt so different,” I answered. For a second, I saw Noodles’ grin fade, and he got a little quiet.

“Haha, yeah . . . Parents,” Shira replied to me.

“Welp, at least you got ‘em right?” Noodles said with a shrug. He looked away for a second, his grin slowly fading. “That means they’re in town, right? Y’all should visit my grandpa’s ramen shop sometimes!” he faced us, his voice bright again.

As everyone was talking amongst themselves, suddenly Mr. Sage cleared his throat from the front of the classroom. “Alright everyone, settle down for a second!”

The chatter of the classroom slowly dies down. Mr. Sage adjusted his collar and gave a small smile. “Today we’re going to do a fun little group activity! Before we get into it, each group should pick a team name. It can be anything! Something that represents your group.”

“Yo! That sounds awesome! What should we call ourselves?” Noodles asked, his body leaning in towards our small triangle formation.

“Hm . . . How about *Harmony*,” Shira offered, his hand on his chin.

“The Ramen Trio?” Noodles threw his hands up. Ramen? Did he even know that I call him Noodles in my head all the time? Probably not. Whatever.

“The Horizon!”

“The Exploding Sensation!”

“Huh—The what?”

Both of them were constantly throwing their suggestions. As I was thinking, their voices faded into the white noise in my mind. What is something that connects things together? Or maybe something that means to go forward? Suggestions of names in my mind switch like TV channels, white noise after white noise.

“. . . Semicolon.” The word slipped out before I even realized.

Noodles and Shira turned to me. Their faces looked surprised.



“HUH? Semicolon?! Soundin’ like a very cool team name! You’re a genius, Taka! A genius! Err . . . What does it mean?”

“Semicolon, huh? I like it,” Shira added. “What makes you pick that name?”

“It’s because it’s simple. Semicolon connects two sentences together, no? In this case, the three of us are connected as one as a group,” I explained.

“Whoa. Dude. That is like . . . So deep,” Noodles struck a dramatic knifehand pose. “Yo, now I wonder what Mana’s group name is! She probably also came up with something so deep . . .” he talked to himself as he left, his voice fading before both of us could respond or hear the rest of his sentence. Wow. It felt kind of nice being complimented like that.

Silence lingered between me and Shira. The classroom was still loud, yet it felt calm.

Shira gave me a small smile which then was followed by a small chuckle. “Haha . . . Semicolon. Didn’t expect that from you.”

I scratched my temple with my thumb. “What do you mean?”

“Nothing, nothing. I just . . . didn’t expect that from you. You don’t say much, but when you do, it’s thoughtful,” Shira smiled, calm as always.

I looked at him, then down at my hands. “. . . Thanks.”

It was strange how people can easily decide what they want to do. Noodles with his ambition to help his grandpa with the ramen shop, Mana with the simple answer of supporting the people she cared about, and Shira already aiming to become a teacher.

I stared at Shira's notes, then back at him. “So why do you want to become a teacher?” I asked, without thinking.

Shira turned to me, looking surprised. He looked away for a moment. “I think . . . I just want to be someone who's there, you know? Kids need something to hold onto. A support branch, I suppose. Even if it's something small.” Shira smiled, but it didn't quite reach his eyes.

“I just thought that teaching felt like the way to do it; to be that person,” he continued. I watched his smile falter, just slightly. Something about the way he said it made my chest tighten.

I opened my mouth.

Closed it.

I held my hands close and looked down. “That's . . . nice,” I said, my voice low.

It wasn't the word that I meant to say, but I didn't know what the right one was.

The noises of the other groups suddenly flooded back in, but for a moment, it felt like it was just the two of us.

## Chapter 2

### Between Tape and Silence

The sound of packing tape being stretched had been a reoccurring noise in my life.

“Taka, have you packed your things?” Mom’s voice drifted from the kitchen, muffled by the cardboard boxes that filled every corner of our small apartment.

“Yeah,” I called back, as I was packing some of my most precious books into my backpack. The rest, the textbooks from a school that I only attended for about a year, had already been packed by dad inside a different cardboard box.

This was our fourth time moving in three years. Whenever we moved, my parents will only tell me about 3 days prior from us moving, eliminating any chance of me ever saying farewell to my friends.

“The truck arrives at 9 tomorrow,” Dad said to mom, as he was carrying a box labeled “Important” in his neat handwriting.

My parents were talking loudly in the other room, something about truck schedules and addresses. I went to what was supposed to be my room, and closed the door. Despite

that, their voices are still very loud. The sound of more tape being pulled and boxes being moved around.

As my parents were packing, I sat on my bed, looking at the room filled with boxes that had been mine for the past year. The walls looked so bare now, without any pictures hanging.

I pulled my knees close to my chest, wrapping my arms around them. I let every sound fade into the white noise. That familiar static in my mind that helped me when I wanted to be alone with myself. It felt cold. Different things came across my mind. The friends that I could have made, the teachers I could get to know, and more areas of the school I could have explored. It was always a “could have”.

“Taka!” Dad’s voice cut through the static. “Make sure you check your school bag! Don’t leave anything behind!”

I got up and checked my school bag. Inside were just three books, all of them with my name written on the top right corner and a “Class 6-A” below it.

I opened one of them, the one with a small monster that Hiro had drawn in the middle. The first page of the book was just my math notes. The second page was just my math notes again, but this time with another little monster sketch by Hiro. I flipped the book once again, and I saw a math problem but with a lot of Leo’s scribbles. He was teaching me how to solve the math problem at the time.

I flipped the book again; this time the page was empty. Right, sometimes I liked to leave a page empty so the ink of my writing wouldn't leak through to the other page. It feels like a new book whenever I left an empty page like this.

Next page, my notes again. When I opened the next one, I knew it was supposed to be a blank and empty page that I had left on purpose, but it was not. Hiro drew monsters on that empty page, while Leo was giving me the formula to the math problem I was troubled at. It caught me by surprise. Even though the ink bled through to the next page, I was happy. I was smiling.

I turned to the next page, expecting more math problems, yet something had dropped. A piece of paper. I picked it up, having completely forgotten about it being there, slipped between my book. The paper was wrinkled, as if it was folded numerous times.

Hiro and Leo had drawn a lot of different kinds of monsters inside. One had wings with one broken horn. One had spiky hair and a supposedly cool jacket. There's another one with spiky hair again, but this time it was complete with a tuxedo and sunglasses. I just remembered that it was supposed to be Hiro, trying to look cool.

There were even random jokes scribbled everywhere.

“Why did Leo look so sad when he missed his bus? Because he will have to do the biggest workout of his life; walking one thousand steps!” - Hiro

“Your jokes are worse than your handwriting.” - Leo

“YOUR MOM is worse than my handwriting.” -Hiro

In the middle of the chaotic scribbles and bad jokes, one small drawing stood out for me. It was a drawing of three stick figures. One with a bow, one with a sword, and one with a shield, with Hiro's handwriting underneath: “Even when Taka doesn't talk much, he's a better friend than you, Leo! So cruel!”

Leo had added below it: “The difference between you and Taka is Taka listens and you don't!”

He then continued, still in his very neat handwriting. “Okay, but seriously. Good job putting up with our insanity, Taka. Guess you're stuck with us both for forever now. Let's visit that new arcade next week when you got time, bro.”

I stared at the paper. The word “forever” seemed to slightly fade into blur. I never had a chance to tell them I was leaving. I never had a chance to ask them how I could contact them again. I never had a chance to ask them if they'd like to stay friends “forever”.

My hands started to shake, and I covered my mouth with my right hand. Tears started dropping from my face, the paper now wet from my tears. I quickly wiped the tears, along with the sadness, but they kept on leaking. There's no point of telling my parents that I wanted to stay, as they would just dismiss me as usual.

People come and go. That's just how life works. Going with how life wants you to work is just how it should be. I never had a choice. Even now, I wasn't really choosing to leave Hiro and Leo. I couldn't even choose to stay.

I wiped my tears and looked at it one last time. I crumpled the paper, slowly and deliberately.

I tossed it into the trash bin, landing without a sound.

\* \* \*

The memory faded as I heard familiar footsteps approaching behind me. The white noise in my mind suddenly faded in a blink of an eye. I found myself back in the classroom, Shira was organizing his notes and the other students chattered around us.



“Yo guys! You’re not gonna believe it, dudes! Mana’s group name is called ‘The Harmonic Stars’! Harmonic Stars! That SCREAMS Mana!” Noodles came back, enthusiastically.

Noodles put his hand on the side of his neck. “I thought we weren’t going to have something cool, but good thing we have Taka here coming up with something so fancy and deep like Semicolon.”

Just as I was thinking about what we’re *actually supposed to do*, Mr. Sage cleared his throat. “Listen up, class! Today we’re going to take things easy! We’re going to play games!” The class erupted with excited chatter and cheers.

“For the first game, you are going to play two truths one lie with your group!” Mr. Sage explained excitedly. “You may begin!”

Noodles looked very excited. He was pumping his fist up in the air like the dwarves from Tolkien’s books. Shira stared at him with a nervous smile.

“Taka, you go first!” Noodles suddenly pointed at me.

*Oh Lord, why me?* I thought Noodles being excited would mean he wanted to go first, but I was wrong.

I put my hand on my chin, leaning forward. I thought for a while. They both also leaned towards me, anticipating. I looked at the both of them with a serious face.

“I lived in 5 different cities.”

“I was once ranked second in my class.”

“I can solve a Rubik’s cube.”

I said my two truths and one lie. Shira’s face looks focused upon hearing the three sentences. Noodles’ face looks . . . surprised for some reason. He then turned to Shira, but Shira was looking down, thinking on his own.

Noodles leaned back, then smacked Shira’s shoulders. “I think it’s obvious. It must be the Rubik’s cube.”

“The Rubik’s cube? Why do you think so? Taka seems like a smart guy—”

“Shh, shh. You don’t get it . . . Students our age can NOT solve Rubik’s cubes. We are not intelligent enough.” Noodles cut off Shira, shushing him.

“Huh?! I saw on FewTube a video of a kid finishing it under 15 seconds!” Shira said, his voice voice insistent, placing his hand on Noodles’ knee.

“Are you serio— Fifteen seconds?!”

They both put their hands on their chin in unison while looking down.

“Well, Taka did mention that he moved a lot. I’ll go with being ranked second once in class,” Shira said, as he leaned back in his chair, crossing his arms with a small smile.

“I’m sticking with the Rubik’s cube!” Noodles announced while pumping his fist at me.

“So what’s the lie?” Shira asked.

I looked at both of them. “Rubik’s cube is the lie.”

“YEAHHH!” Noodles erupted while jumping. He was the loudest one in class, single-handedly making everyone look at him. Shira nervously tried to shush him for being too loud. Mana on the other hand, quietly clapped to support him from her own group while smiling, even though she had no idea what Noodles was happy about. At that moment, being stared by everyone, I felt like I wanted to die.

Mr. Sage chuckled from the front of the class. “Alright, you three. Settle down so the others can hear each other.”

Noodles sat down, both his hands on his mouth. “Sorry! Aaah! I was being loud again! This time I don’t have any chocolate!”

Shira stared at Noodles with a blank expression, then stared at me with a gentle one. “That was somewhat a surprise. It must be cool, huh? Looking at different sceneries from five different places.”

“Eh,” I muttered quietly while looking away. I never thought of it as something cool. More tiring than anything.

Shira didn't push further. He gave me his usual calm smile that oddly felt comforting. “Even if it doesn't feel cool to you,” he said softly, “someday you might look back and realize you've seen so many; more than some people ever will in their entire lifetime. To me, that's cool, Taka.”

I didn't know how to respond. I tried hiding my surprised expression. *Did I say that it “doesn't feel cool” out loud?* I wanted to challenge that thought, but at the same time don't.

I didn't know how to respond. I tried thinking of other topics to change into soon after. I wanted to say something meaningful back, but I couldn't think of anything.

I didn't know how to respond. I clenched my fist for a moment and relaxed them. I searched for words. I wanted to say so many things but none at all.

I didn't respond.

## Chapter 3

### The Loudest and Quietest Table

As we made our way to the cafeteria, Daichi was telling us about his morning routine at his grandpa's shop.

“Yeah! I woke up at around 5:30 AM every day to help gramps prep the vegetable. He would yell at me along the lines of ‘Daichi! If you slack off now, you’re eating ramen without seasoning!’ and that usually got me juiced and worked up!” Daichi said, laughing.

I found myself listening to the details instead of just waiting for him to finish. Something about Daichi's routine got me curious.

“5:30? Every day?” I said.

Daichi nodded aggressively. “Yeah! Even on weekends! I’m a tough guy, I know, I know,” he said with full confidence. Shira and I gave him a blank stare.

Daichi chuckled. “Gramps always told me that consistency is key to everything, y’know!”

“That’s early.” I wasn’t quite sure why kept on engaging on the conversation, but something about his will and dedication struck me. “Don’t you ever get tired?”

Daichi slowed down his pace, and he looked genuinely surprised by my question. “Uh . . . yeah, I guess! Sometimes! My friends would invite me to play games, but I would already be asleep by 9 PM. Worth it, though! Watching gramps happy is enough to make this big boy happy.”

Shira turned back to Daichi with a smile as he was walking. “Hard worker, huh?”

Noodles chuckled. “Haha, you think so? Most guys just think I’m crazy for always doing nothing but help gramps.”

“Not crazy. Determined.” I said quietly, as I suddenly felt Noodles’ gaze. “If someone thinks you’re crazy for helping your loved one, then they probably just haven’t seen someone who kept going no matter what.”

For a moment, Noodles stared at me, his mouth slightly open. He muttered under his breath, “I . . .”, then just smiled, looking ahead again as he walked.

The cafeteria was bustling with students, with sounds of silverware and chatter filling the large room. It felt like I was watching a whole ecosystem of student circles and hierarchies.

Me and Noodles followed Shira closely behind right after we picked our tray and get our food. We were scanning for empty seats. I would say “let’s pick seats opposite of the loud

students, my dudes!” but I don’t have the guts to voice opinions to the people I just knew.

“Hm,” Shira stopped, Noodles almost crashed into him. “Where do you guys want to sit? Somewhere quiet?” Noodles shrugged with a smile. I nodded aggressively.

As we were walking, some students called out for Noodles. It was a group of five students. Their uniforms were unbuttoned revealing their t-shirt underneath, same as Noodles. “Yo! Daichi! You wanna sit with us?”

“Yo yo! Maybe next time, dudes! I’m with my new bros today!” Noodles said, keeping his signature big grin. He was talking as if he hadn’t met those guys today either. I was wondering why he chose to sit with us very quiet guys instead of them.

We sat down at our table, but Noodles didn’t. He placed his food tray and then asked: “Hey guys, is it fine if Mana and her friends sit here as well?”

“Sure thing!” Shira said. Honestly, I trusted Shira’s judgement, so I nodded.

Not long after, Noodles brought four girls to sit in the same table as us. *Oh no. Introductions.* They went to fill out all the rest of the missing seats.

“Hi, I’m Emi. Nice to meet you,” the girl with black hair and long braids gave out her hand to me with a warm smile. “Taka,” I replied, as I shook her hand. She also introduced herself to Shira.

A girl with glasses and a half-up light blue hair suddenly stood up and leaned forward. “WHOA! Daichi’s friend?! A friend of Mana’s boyfriend is my potential bo—” Before the girl could say anything more, Emi smacked the back of her head.

“Sorry, this is Yuki. Sometimes she says things that would end our lives,” Emi explained. I didn’t know how to answer so I just stared with a flat face. I suppose Emi was the Shira of the group and Yuki was the Noodles of the group.

Another girl, with sleek black hair and confident posture, jumped into the conversation. “Oh, Daichi’s friend? It’s so refreshing to see Daichi with friends who uses their indoor voice. Woah . . . I’m not dreaming. Didn’t think you had it in you.” For a moment, I saw veins protruding out from Noodles’ temple, but he still had his big grin.

“That one is Nao. She’s my childhood friend. I knew her since I was *this* tall,” Noodles explained, then crouched down slightly and held his hand near his knees.

“Taka,” I said, attempting to introduce myself. For some reason she started laughing. Probably because of my extremely flat tone when I said my name or my unfortunately naturally



stoic face. Emi gave her a psychotic stare while my face unfortunately stayed stoic as she laughed. “Huh?! What? I just didn’t think Daichi would be friends with someone so calm and so like me!” Emi smacked her. *She’s nothing like me.*

“Last but not least, this is Mana!” Emi explained. Mana waved slowly, accompanied with a warm smile.

“Thank you for letting us join you,” Mana said softly.

Everyone settled in to their seats, and naturally, the conversation broke into smaller groups. Yuki was flailing her arms around, telling the other girls about some drama that happened earlier. Out of the four girls, Yuki was the only one who wasn’t from the same class as us.

“So, then Mr. Lloyd said—” Yuki’s voice carried over the entire table.

“Oh? Mr. Lloyd? You mean the one with the rumors?” Nao put her hand on her chin, her face smug.

Yuki gasped. “Those rumors were true?! Him being an ex-soldier?! Is that why he sounds like a killer?!”

Emi looked like she was trying to swallow her food faster. “You guys . . . It’s not nice to talk badly about someone like that.”

The girls got absorbed in their own conversation. Shira suddenly turned to Noodles with curiosity. “Daichi. I’ve been thinking about what you said in class. About helping your grandpa with the ramen shop?”

Noodles paused mid-chew, his usual energetic expression softening. He swallowed his food and rested his hand on the table. “Oh yeah? What about it?” Noodles tilted his head.

“What made you come up with that ambition? It sounded genuine and meaningful,” Shira said, resting his chin on his hand, giving Noodles his full attention.

“Oh man. Gramps has been running it since forever. I guess it was there even way before I was born. Like, it’s not just a random job for him. For him, it was his entire life,” Noodles scratched the back of his neck, looking at his food tray.

Shira nodded, encouraging him to continue further.

“He’s . . . been looking really tired lately,” Noodles’ voice grew quieter. “Like really, really tired, I guess. Sometimes I would just catch him staring at the steam from the broth, and he looks . . . drained. I dunno, am I making sense?”

“You are,” Shira replied gently.

Noodles traced around his plate with his eating utensils. “He raised me since I was a baby, y’know? Never complained and never made me feel like I was a burden.” His grin faded

for a moment, and he forced a smile on himself. “That’s why I wanted to help the old guy! I’ll always do my best!”

“That’s really admirable, Daichi. Not everyone wants to give back to their loved ones like that,” Shira encouraged.

I found myself listening despite feeling like I was intruding on something personal. There was something about seeing this different side of Noodles, even for a split second, that made me understand why he chose to sit with us instead of the loud group from earlier. At that moment, I thought to myself, Daichi really was admirable.

“OH!” Yuki suddenly jumped from her seat, startling everyone. “I just remembered something important! Emi, didn’t you say that this school’s library has an art display?! They also put artworks made by students, right?!”

Emi blinked, clearly not remembering saying such things. Before she could say anything, Yuki pulled Emi up. “Come on! We won’t get to see much of the art if you nag around! You too, Nao! You love that artsy stuff!”

“But I was just— No, no! My potato!” Nao protested as she was also pulled by Yuki. It honestly surprised me how Yuki has the strength to pull two girls at once.

“Daichi! You too!” Yuki declared, as she was dragging the two girls. “You need some culture in your life! Potatoes can wait!”

“Wait, wait!” Noodles looked back at Mana with concern. “Mana, are you coming?”

Mana stood up to fix Noodles’ collar, then shook her head gently, smiling. “I’m okay. You can go have fun with Nao. You two hadn’t caught up properly yet.”

“But—”

“Go,” she said softly with a smile, giving him an encouraging nod. “I’ll be fine here with Taka and Shira.”

The way Mana smoothed the fabric of Noodles’ collar so carefully made me shift in my seat. It felt familiar, yet my stomach feels twisted. I turned my attention back to my food, but the rice suddenly felt stale in my mouth.

Noodles hesitated for a moment, then grinned. “Alright! But I’ll be back soon, okay? Taka, Shira, take care of her for me!” He waved at the both of us, before Nao suddenly pulled his collar from behind, his voice faded into the cafeteria chatter.

“Hey, Mana, Taka, sorry, but I should probably go to make sure they don’t destroy anything,” Shira stood up, sighing

with a small smile. “Yuki, Nao and Daichi in the same group sounds like a chaotic combination.”

And suddenly, it was just me and Mana at the table.

The cafeteria noise seemed to rush back all at once. The sounds of distant laughter, silverware, and chairs scraping against the floor. Without Noodles’ energy, Shira’s calm charisma, or the other girls’ chatter, the space felt strangely so empty despite the students surrounding us.

I stared at my half-finished lunch, unsure what I should do. Should I say something? Should I keep eating? The silence between the both of us stretched. It wasn’t uncomfortable exactly, but it felt somewhat heavy.

Mana gathered some of the empty trays the others had left behind, and stacked them neatly. “He worries about being too loud,” she said. “Daichi, I mean. He always asked me if he was being too loud,” Mana chuckled.

I looked up, surprised. That didn’t match the confident, energetic person I was with the entire day.

“Really?”

She nodded, a small smile playing on her lips. “Taka, thank you. Thank you for being Daichi’s friend.” It felt so sudden to receive those words, like I didn’t deserve them at all. I hadn’t even said much. “He was worried about his first day of

high school, on whether people would actually be friends with him or perceive him as annoying.”

“Didn’t know he felt that way. More than anything, I was just quiet,” I said.

Mana chuckled softly. “Strangely, Daichi’s more drawn to people who are quieter.” She paused, cleaning the table with her napkin. “Like you!” she added, her tone light but her eyes thoughtful.

I stared at her puzzled. “I’m not sure if that’s a compliment,” I said flatly.

Mana giggled. “It is! Daichi could use more friends like you. You keep him from flying off the handle.”

“That felt more like Shira. I’m more of a background tree than anything, and I’m fine with it, honestly.” The words slipped from my mouth before I could stop them. Too much. Too honest. It sounded like I was unloading when I didn’t mean to.

Mana tilted her head, studying me. “You really don’t believe that, do you?” she asked curiously.

I shrugged, eating the last piece of my food. I didn’t know how to respond, so I didn’t.

“Actually,” she said, glancing towards where the others had disappeared. “I’m glad that Daichi found friends like you and Shira. I worry about him sometimes.”

“Worry?” I found myself asking, also glancing towards where they had left.

“His hands are rough, Taka. He puts too much pressure on himself. He barely had time to hang out, or just simply rest.” She paused, then continued, her voice quieter. “It’s not easy to always put so much high energy in front of everyone.”

I thought about the Noodles I’d seen all day. The one who was always grinning and replying with one hundred percent energy. It never occurred to me that it might be exhausting as I thought that it was just his character. When I shook his hand the first time, I thought his hands were calloused because of his love for sports, but I suppose there’s a different layer of Daichi that I hadn’t penetrated yet.

Mana looked down at her hands, a small smile played on her face. “He talked about you and Shira when the class ended earlier.”

“He did?” I found myself leaning forward slightly.

“Mm-hm,” Mana nodded. “He said you came up with the name ‘Semicolon’. He thought that it was really thoughtful and meaningful. And that Shira was patient with him, even when he

was being . . . him. But mostly, he seemed surprised that you two didn't find him annoying."

I frowned. "Why would we be annoyed?"

"That's what I told him," Mana said gently. "I just hope . . . I just hope that he'll let himself be more at ease with you both. He's still figuring out if it's okay to not always be the loud cheerful guy. I think he's just worried that if people see him when he's tired or quiet, they wouldn't want him anymore, Taka."

"If anything, he's a very outgoing and cool guy," I said, wiping the mess from my food with a napkin. "Why would *he* want to be friends with . . . me?"

Mana let out a soft sigh, shaking her head, giving me a look that was both gentle and slightly amused. "You know, he actually looked up what 'Semicolon' meant after class."

I blinked, surprised. "He . . . did?"

She nodded with a small smile. "He was so excited when he first learned about the meaning from you. He told me that you said it means connecting two sentences." She paused, watching my reaction. "But he found out that it means something more. It also means choosing to continue when you could have stopped. He told me that it was exactly what he needed to hear today."



I felt something shift inside of me, as if years of rusted gears suddenly moved again. Not quite confidence, but maybe, just maybe, recognition that I wasn't completely invisible.

"Even a background tree is a part of the painting, Taka. A background tree who made someone's day with the perfect metaphor of not giving up is worth keeping around!" Mana added with a grin. For a second, her encouraging grin reminded me of Daichi that I could almost see his face painted over hers. I suppose they are alike, one way or another.

"Heh. I guess you're right," I smirked.

The sound of approaching footsteps and familiar laughter broke our conversation. I looked up to see Daichi and the others bouncing his way back to our table, his face lit up with excitement.

"Yo! Taka, Mana! You should've seen this painting! I had no clue what it meant, but it had like, some strange swirls and stuff that made me feel things, y'know?" His eyes were bright as his arms were everywhere. "There was also like this art by an alumni student that was like a slayer of demons!"

I watched as Daichi talked, remembering everything Mana told me. About him worrying if he was being too loud. About his rough hands from helping his grandpa. About him looking up Semicolon. Looking at him now, being all excited about art

he didn't understand and wanting to share with us anyway, made me feel oddly warm.

At that moment, I felt like I was seeing Daichi clearly. Not just some random loud guy, not just some guy with a commendable aspiration. Just . . . my friend. My friend who was genuinely excited to share his day with me. I couldn't remember the last time someone had been this eager to include me in anything.

Without thinking, I just smiled. Really smiled. Not forced or awkward, just something real.

"That sounds so cool, Daichi."

For a split second, Daichi's face looked genuinely surprised. Then something shifted in his expression, and his face broke into his usual big grin.

\* \* \*

The walk home from the first day of high school felt different somehow. My walk was a little bit slower than usual, but then it made me notice some part of the neighborhood that I hadn't before.

I really talked, not just answering questions. The bustle of the cafeteria, Daichi's lively energy, Shira's responsible steady presence, and Mana's kind words. It all stayed with me until the end of school. I found myself stopping and looking into the sunset.

With the warm sunlight on my face, I can hardly see, but I smiled. But I quickly wiped that smile off my face so I wouldn't be seen as a weirdo walking with a weird grin.

There would be club sign-ups tomorrow and also an election for the class rep. I wonder what would happen if Daichi was the one chosen as the class rep. Maybe there would be ramen all day every day, huh? Shira seems like the safest choice. He's a reliable person after all.

I ended up arriving home sooner than I expected. The echoes of everyone's words suddenly vanished as soon as I slid the apartment door open.

"I'm home," I said, as I took my shoes off.

Silence. I suppose my parents weren't home yet, so I went to my room. My room was exactly as I had left this morning. A single desk with my lamp, and a bed that I tidied up in the morning. Nothing on the walls, no pictures, no posters, just the essentials.

I dropped my bag next to my desk and sat on the chair. For a moment, I just leaned back and stared at the ceiling. The quietness was a huge contrast to the cafeteria, with the only audible sound being the clock and the air conditioner.

I pulled out my phone and stared at the blank screen. Daichi and Shira had mentioned about exchanging contacts, but the bell rang and we completely forgot about it afterwards. I wondered what they were doing right now.

Daichi was probably helping his grandpa to prepare for dinner rush, chopping vegetables with those calloused hands. Shira . . . what could he be doing at this time? I hadn't asked Shira much about his routines, which was something I probably should have. He was giving attention to everyone when they spoke. The least I could do is just ask and listen, but I didn't.

I searched my bag that I had left open next to my desk, and brought out my sticky notes. I wrote 'ask Shira' and stuck it on the bare wall.

I stared at the sticky note on the wall.

What was I doing? Why was I getting attached to these new people that I've just met today?

I stood up and reached towards the note, my hand hovering inches away from it. My hand was shaking as I slowly reached towards it. Then I stopped, clenching my fist instead. I

couldn't bring myself to rip it off from the wall, yet this is exactly what I promised myself I wouldn't do anymore. I should know better by now.

The front door suddenly clicked open.

"I'm home," Dad said as he opened the door. I didn't answer, as usual. I heard his footstep linger in front of my door for a moment, before moving to the living room. The TV turned on, but not long before I heard him let out a quiet sigh.

Not long after, I heard the door open again.

"I'm home," Mom said as the door swung open. "Welcome home," Dad's muffled voice came from the living room. I heard her footsteps on the wooden floor, walking towards the kitchen. The refrigerator door opened and closed. I heard the stove turn on, followed by sizzling afterwards.

"Takumi, let's eat!" Mom's voice called out to me from the kitchen.

I looked at the digital clock on my desk. 6:23 PM. I got up and made my way through the kitchen.

The dining table had three plates up, just the same way as it has ever been. Different location, different scene, different room, yet it never felt different. Mom placed a bowl of rice for each one of us, with the cooked chicken in the middle of the dinner table. Dad was already seated, checking his phone for

what I had assumed was work. I sat down, and we all started eating.

“How was school?” Mom asked as she was taking some of the chicken meat over to her bowl.

“Fine,” I said, staring at the rice bowl in front of me.

“You made some new friends?” Dad asked me mid-chew, glancing up from his phone.

“Yeah.”

“That’s good. Really good. In middle school, you barely talked to anyone for months, until Rei came along and got you out of your shell. You two were inseparable back then. Seems like you’re doing well now,” Mom said, sharing a quick glance at me with a small smile.

I stopped for a moment. The name hit me like a physical blow. My appetite suddenly vanished. The chicken that I ate felt like cardboard. The smell of the food too strong; nauseating.

I stared at my rice bowl. Of course she’d bring up Rei. Of course she’d choose to dig up that particular grave tonight.

Dad noticed my silence and shot Mom a look. “Maybe we should focus on . . . the present.”

“What?” Mom looked confused, then her face went pale as she caught Dad’s expression. “Oh. Taka, I’m sorry. I didn’t think—”

“It’s fine,” I said, but my voice came out tight, clipped.

Dad looked at mom with an expression I’ve never seen before. It was between panic and anger. “We all agreed we wouldn’t—”

“I know,” Mom whispered. “I forgot. I’m sorry.”

Dad cleared his throat awkwardly.

“You’re settling in faster this time,” Dad said carefully. “The school . . . Well, it seems stable. Good reputation. Should be good for future college applications.”

I said nothing. We ate in silence for a while, with the only sound being the TV that was still on in the living room and sounds of clanking chopsticks.

Dad’s hands fidgeted. He looked away, his mouth opening and closing, but no words came out. Before I finished my meal, Dad finally broke the silence. “We asked about your school back then. We always do,” Dad said, almost to himself. “You always said you were fine.”

Something about that line ticks me off. I tightened the grip on my chopsticks. “Yeah. I’m always fine.” I looked away as I said those words.

“Look, kid. Moving was hard on all of us. What were we supposed to do? I can’t control when companies command me to do this or that, when contracts end,” Dad looked at Mom, then back at me. “What I mean is, we do what we must do.” Dad’s voice was tired.

“You seemed to prefer being alone anyway, right? Wasn’t that what you said during middle school? Crowds made you nervous? You said you didn’t mind.” Mom said softly, but there was uncertainty in her voice.

I looked down at my almost empty bowl of rice. “Right. I preferred it.” I said quietly. My eyes narrowed. Tunnel vision.

“Did you?” Dad stopped eating and stared at me. For once, he didn’t sound defensive, rather confused.

I stared at him silently. Didn’t mutter a single word back, as if I didn’t have the strength to even open my mouth. I looked back at my food, not being able to hold my gaze.

Dad’s phone started buzzing. He ignored it.

“We care about you, kid. We really do. Please understand that,” he said with a shaky voice. “But moving is something that



we have to do to keep this roof above our heads,” Dad leaned forward, setting aside his bowl of rice.

Mom put her hand on Dad’s chest gently. I saw her own worry in the gesture. “Taka, is it about your friends?” She paused for a moment, then tilted her head, her expression concerned. “Is this about Leo? Hiro? Sora? Tomoko? . . . Or maybe Rei?”

At the mention of Rei, my jaw tightened. A knot twisted in my stomach. I curled my fists into my knees, not saying a single word.

The silence was long. Dad’s phone started buzzing again, but this time he turned his phone completely off.

“I’ll wash the dishes,” I said, as I stood up.

I heard Dad let out a small sigh and Mom’s quiet voice. “Maybe we should have . . .”

I washed the dishes deliberately with care. Behind me, I heard them talk in lowered voices.

“The Indou position should be stable,” Dad was saying, voice firm. “Three-year contract minimum. Maybe longer if the merger goes through.”

“You said that about the last one,” Mom replied, with worry in her voice.

“This is different. It has to be.”

“What if it’s not? What if we have to move again in a short time, and he just . . . breaks?”

“Taka’s resilient. Kids are resilient.”

“Are they? Look at our son, Tadamichi. Really look at him.”

With each word they exchanged, my movements grew less careful. Rougher. Insistent. The sound of their conversation washed into the noise of the running sink water, as the scrubbing became the only thing that I felt. *Always fine*. The words repeat in my head as I scraped a spot that was already clean.

If you both care, why don’t you ask what I actually want? Can’t I have a choice? A choice to stay? A choice to get to know everyone better? A chance?

My fingers clenched the ceramic bowl so hard, then it slipped from my grip.

The sharp crack echoed through the kitchen, cutting their conversation short. The ceramic bowl shattered, its pieces scattered across the sink and floor. A scar on the back of my hand started forming, its blood washing off on the running sink.

“What was that?” Mom asked, glancing over.

I covered the back of my hand with my other hand to relieve some of the pain. “I dropped a bowl.”

“Are you hurt?” Dad asked, his voice still firm. When I didn’t answer immediately, he stood up and moved closer. “Let me see.”

“I’m fine,” I answered, still facing the sink. With the sink water still running against my scar, I quickly turned it off.

Mom looked at Dad, and then me with a somewhat concerned look. “There are bandages in the counter. I’ll grab it for y—”

“No,” I replied sharply.

The room got quiet for a moment before suddenly Dad muttered under his breath. “This is what I was trying to say. You bottle your frustrations up, and then . . .”

“I wasn’t frustrated.”

“Right.” Dad’s tone defeated. “You were just aggressively scrubbing the dishes while you were perfectly calm,” Dad ran his hand through his hair. “Taka, I don’t know how to . . . We’ve been trying to figure out things for years. You said you wanted space; we gave you space. What else can I do, son? I tried my best for you, Taka.”

I dried my hand with a towel, leaving a red stain on its white texture.

“I’m cleaning it up,” I said.

Dad tried to reach out his hand behind me, but dropped it and let out a heavy sigh. “That’s not what I meant.”

As I crouched down to pick up the cold large pieces of the shattered bowl, I felt both of them watching me, neither knowing what to do.

I picked up the pieces until there was none left, throwing them into the trash can. The small pieces clung to my fingers and I had to rinse them off one by one.

“Done,” I said.

Mom went to take some bandages from the counter, and held them out. I looked at her for a moment. Her expression wasn’t mad; just tired. Worried, I took the bandages.

“Good,” she said softly, and I caught her exchanging a look with Dad that seemed to be concerned.

I wrapped a small bandage on the back of my hand and went to my room, closing the door behind me.

In the deafening silence, I sat down at my desk, and opened my book to study, but couldn’t. I tried to read the first page of the book, but words seem to blur.

Rei. That name. Remembering it gave me an eerie ring. Darkness. Then white noise. A hairpin. A hand that tried to reach me in the dark. The car window that rolled up slowly. Tears. The sound of an engine.

I squeezed my eyes tighter and shut the book in an instant. Trying to forget is trying to remember what you wanted to bury. Hiro, Leo, Sora, Tomoko, and Rei. Especially Rei. I didn't want to remember. Why can't you all just stay buried in my mind?

I buried you, Hiro, but whenever that stupid big grin appeared on Daichi, I heard your voice saying dumb things.

I buried you, Leo, but in Shira's voice, I heard your voice supporting me every step of the way.

I buried you, Rei, and I never met anyone that came close to you.

In the midst of the darkness, I saw a patch of yellow that stood out. The sticky note on the wall. It was glowing from the study lamp's light.

'Ask Shira'.

A reminder to reach out, or just another trap I'm setting for myself.

## Chapter 4

### Ask Shira

I heard the sound of an engine.

I saw a cherry blossom, yet why was it black and white?

What was that in front of me? Glass? The glass spanned to both sides and I couldn't see where it ended. I couldn't reach the black and white Sakura tree.

It was so dark in here. Cold. Why?

The engine sound became louder, almost deafening.

I looked down, and I felt a heavy shackle on both of my legs.

I looked behind me, and I saw the shackles attached to a huge boulder.

It suddenly started moving away from me. It was heavy. I couldn't stay in place and fell down.

I was dragged, and I couldn't stand up.

Why were my legs numb? Not even my hands had the strength to help me sit.

After a while, I just let the boulders drag me. I was farther away from the monochrome cherry blossom. Farther and farther.

Why did that black and white cherry blossom remain so clear even when it was this far away? I got farther, yet it was still there.

I blinked, and suddenly it turned into a small light in the distance. A small yellow light. The engine roared louder, but the light didn't fade. Not even a flicker.

That deafening sound slowly bled into my alarm clock. For a moment, I couldn't tell if I was still dreaming or not. The yellow light was still there, glowing.

Wait, no. It was my sticky note. The words blurred for a second, then came into focus and stared back at me: 'Ask Shira'.

I looked at the alarm clock. 6:01 AM. I turned it off. Silence.

'Ask Shira'. Those words seemed to mock me in the morning light. Ask Shira what exactly? How was his morning? What he had for breakfast? Why did I even write this down?

I reached out my hand to peel off that sticky note.

Oh. Right. My bandaged hand from last night. Why did it still hurt?

I crumpled the sticky note into a small yellow ball. Then I smoothed it back out again. Then crumpled it. Then smoothed it. Why?

Why was I doing this? What was I doing?

The bandage on my hand pulled tight as I moved, reminding me of what happened last night.

I needed to get ready for school.

\* \* \*

The train station was busier than yesterday, filled with morning rush of students and office workers. I put on my earbuds to muffle the noisy atmosphere.

As the train approached, I noticed a student, same uniform as me. His hair was red, surrounded by four other students. Something about his posture was different than mine. More relaxed. Confident.

He brought up a game he used to play as a kid on the Nondendo DS while laughing with his friends. The game he



mentioned, was also my favorite game growing up, but our difference was clear. He had his friends to talk about the game to while I didn't.

Train doors slid open with a mechanical hiss. I stepped aside, finding myself a seat. The red-haired student got on the same car but moved towards the opposite end with his friends. I wondered if he was a new student as well or if it was just another Tuesday for him. Either way, I do have to admit I envy him.

"Next stop, Midorihaven." The train doors slid close slowly.

The city blurred past the train window. Buildings, people, and different lives, going past me in a fast motion. It reminded me of the rain. Different rain drops moved down so fast, we didn't even get the chance to properly look at one. Some rain drops ended up in a puddle on the hot street road. Some rain drops ended up on a high apartment roof. Some rain drops ended up on the tip of a skyscraper. But not every part of the cloud rain at the same time. Some part of the cloud did not rain at all for a long, long time. Some rain drops never belonged anywhere. That's me, I guess. The raindrop that didn't fall.

By the time I reached school, a familiar weight crawled on my back. The cautious voice in my head was louder than ever.

Don't make plans. Don't write sticky notes about asking people stuff that did not matter. Don't get attached.

The classroom had just started filling up when I arrived. The social groups are now clearer than yesterday, with student bonds being more defined. I hesitated near the doorway, scanning for Shira. I shouldn't ask him.

He was at his usual spot on the front row seat, organizing his notes with that calmness I noticed from yesterday. However, when I looked to my right, Daichi's seat was empty. He was probably helping his grandpa again.

I walked to my usual seat from yesterday, my hand in my pocket so he wouldn't see my bandage. Shira looked up at me, smiling. "Morning, Taka."

I nodded. I had my usual stoic face, my lips flat from the far left to the far right of my face. Just as I sat down, I thought to myself if I should really be sitting next to Shira. I would just get so attached and talk to him more if I did sit next to him like yesterday.

I stood back up, heading for the desk on my left, one seat away from where I'd sat yesterday. This is a safe distance.

Shira's expression shifted slightly. "Huh?" he said. He looked confused, but then his face broke into his usual calm

smile. To my surprise, he picked up his bag and moved to the desk beside mine. *Oh what?*

I picked up my bag once again with one hand, and moved to the desk on my left, one seat away from Shira. He picked up his bag as well and followed, moving to the desk beside me.

He stared at me; he was still smiling. My face was still flat when I stared back. We stared at each other quietly.

I got up again, slowly this time, still locking my sights onto him. I shook my head. He nodded his. I shook again more aggressively. He nodded even more aggressively.

I moved to the desk on my left yet again, but before I could put down my book, I looked at Shira who was already on my right. When I put my book closer to my desk, he also did the same. I picked up my book, he picked his.

I moved again, finally on the far-left side of the classroom. I got nowhere else to go so I sat down with a sigh. Shira, who was already magically on my right, started chuckling lightly. “Haha, what’s wrong, Taka? Is everything alright?”

I nodded slowly.

Just then I realized I made a huge blunder.

“Oh! Hey Taka!” Emi’s voice came from behind me, bright and welcoming. “Morning, Taka!”

I turned around slowly to see Emi right behind me, Nao on her right, and Mana behind Emi, all with curious expressions. Without Daichi's overwhelming energy to draw attention, I suddenly felt extremely exposed to their gaze. *I should just disappear.*

I waved with my right hand, my bandaged left hand still in my pocket, and then quickly turned my sights back forward.

Shira turned to me, still at his desk. "Are you alright? Did I do something wrong?" his voice slowly becoming more concerned.

"No," I said. I didn't want Shira to get the wrong idea. "I'm fine, really."

"You look . . ." Mana tilted her head slightly, studying me with her perceptive eyes. "Is everything okay?"

Nao leaned forward on her desk. "You've got this staring into the void thing going on, huh? Did you miss Daichi that badly?" she assumed with a smug.

I slowly nodded, not wanting to give my actual reason. Nao suddenly broke down laughing.

Shira chuckled. "You should've just mentioned that you wanted to sit with everyone else, Taka."

He paused for a moment, and put his finger on his chin. “Now that you mention it, where’s Daichi?”

Mana looked down, frowning.

Nao stood up, going beside Mana, then pat her on the back, her smile slowly fading. “Eh, the usual. Daichi being Daichi.”

I looked at Shira, then at Nao. “He had to help his grandpa yesterday, right? He probably worked late and tired himself out, but I think that’s a commendable thing.”

“What? Daichi doesn’t help his grandpa on Mondays,” Nao said, scratching her head. “He had to do his second part time job. You know, the food delivery, and stuff.”

“He has two part time jobs?!” Shira asked, his calm demeanor suddenly shifted to concern. “That’s a lot for someone our age.”

Emi leaned back, her gaze upwards. “What a hard worker, huh? That’s unhealthy . . .” She paused for a moment, then turned towards Nao. “What’s his first part time job again?”

“Huh, I forgot, honestly. He doesn’t like talking about his jobs. One time I asked him about it, he cleverly dodged it and changed the topic,” Nao explained, her smile completely gone while still patting Mana on the back. “Classic Daichi. Acts like everything’s easy when it’s not.”

Emi turned to see Mana's frowned expression, then came up with an idea. "Hey, it's alright! What if we all hang out together after school? All of us, including Daichi and Yuki as well. There's a good restaurant, known for its very good milk tea."

"Oh, you mean Uncle Kinu's?" Shira asked with a bright smile.

"No, silly! This is the owner's sister's place! Auntie Linu's!" Emi swatted the air, too far away to actually reach Shira's shoulder. Shira's expression looked as if he understood completely what Emi said. *Who even is Uncle Kinu?!*

Hearing those words, Mana looked up slightly, a small smile playing on her face.

"So, are you coming as well, Taka?" Mana invited me.

"Probably," I said, which can roughly translate to 'no' or 'maybe not'.

"No pressure," Shira said gently. "Just join us if you want to."

"Is it about Daichi?" Nao assumed. *Oh boy, this girl really liked to assume.* "We can just forcefully drag him, duct tape him, and bring him to the restaurant ourselves."

“Or we can just say Mana’s sad because of him,” Emi added.

“ . . . Or we can just say Mana’s sad because of him,” Nao repeated after Emi, looking away with a flat face.

Mana giggled, her face bright. “It’s fine if he can’t come, he might need—”

“He CAN come,” Nao and Emi said in unison, then both of them ruffled up her hair.

The conversation was interrupted by the classroom door sliding open. Mr. Sage walked in slowly with a smile, carrying a box full of papers. Shira suddenly got up from his desk to help Mr. Sage.

“Thank you, Shirakawa.” Mr. Sage said with a smile, setting the box on his desk. “Very thoughtful of you.” He pulled out the papers out from the box. “Speaking of being thoughtful and responsible, this is a perfect timing for today’s class representative election!”

As Shira went back to his desk, the classroom buzzed with sudden energy. Some students started whispering among themselves, some started laughing, and some started sitting up straight.

“Now, now. I want everyone to be on their best behavior and think carefully about this,” Mr. Sage continued, while

writing ‘Class Representative Election’ on the whiteboard. “Your class representative has to be someone who communicates well with the teachers and also classmates. Someone who can organize activities, help resolve conflicts responsibly, and cares about everyone’s well-being.”

I glanced around the classroom for Daichi. Still not here.

“You all have ten minutes! Ten minutes, and then we can start doing the anonymous voting.” Mr. Sage announced. “Remember, you can also vote for yourselves!”

As soon as Mr. Sage finished speaking, the class erupted with chatter and laughter as he distributed the ballot papers.

“Obviously it should be Yama!” someone called out from the back with a raspy voice. “He’s hilarious! Can you all imagine the morning announcements?!”

“What? No way!” A girl stood up from the middle of the classroom. “Vote for me! Vote for Mio! My dad owns multiple convenience stores, so I’ll give out snacks for everyone!”

The class cheered and laughed. “Mio for president! Snack queen!”

Yama stood up as well with a smirk. “Wait, wait! Heh, tell you what, I can do both! Jokes AND food! I’ll compliment your smile every time I hand out snacks!”



The sound of laughter grew louder and louder. Some students are making ridiculous campaign promises.

I felt a growing knot in my stomach. This wasn't what Mr. Sage had asked for at all. They were taking this huge responsibility as a joke. It was noisy and annoying, but nothing I couldn't handle.

"I'll make sure there are no homework for all of us!"

"I'll convince the principal to install a whole vending machine in our classroom!"

"Yo, what about that Daichi guy?!" Yama suggested. "He's not even here! That would be so funny! Elect the lazy guy who's not even here!"

Lazy guy?

"Oh my god, yes!" another voice joined in. "He's just going to come in here and then we're like 'hello class rep', haha!"

"Haha, that's an awesome idea! I mean in a way, we're forcing the lazy one to be diligent," someone else called out, laughing.

Mio leaned forwards, her voice louder than ever. "You want the lazy person to be our class rep? But what about the snacks?!"

"It would be funny, trust me!" Yama said enthusiastically.

Lazy person?

Mana's voice suddenly echoed in my mind: "He's still figuring out if it's okay to not always be the loud cheerful guy. I think he's just worried that if people see him when he's tired or quiet, they wouldn't want him anymore."

These people had no idea what they were talking about. I felt my chest burning. My forearm suddenly felt so itchy. I couldn't stop scratching. Why was this ticking me off so much?

"Daichi for class rep!" someone called out mockingly. "He can hold meetings in his grandpa's ramen shop!"

"That's if he can show up at his own house!" another voice added, causing more laughter.

For a moment, I stopped and looked around me. Shira looked like he was forcing a smile on himself, trying to blend in with everyone, but his clenched fist on his knees betrayed him.

Emi was shushing everyone quietly, seemingly afraid to ruin the mood but knew that this did not sound right. Nobody listened to her.

I glanced at Mana. Her soft expression had been completely replaced with something sad. She was leaning forward in her seat, but was looking down. I saw her jaw move slowly, like she was trying to piece out words to say to everyone.

Her eyes looked genuinely hurt, in a way it made my heart ache.

Next to Mana, I saw Nao, leaning closer to Mana. She whispered something I couldn't quite hear, but I caught her briefly holding Mana's hands tightly. Mana looked at her, then nodded slowly. I saw the tension from Mana's shoulders slowly fade.

The jokes kept on flooding in. Joke after joke about Daichi being an irresponsible lazy student.

I could see Nao's expressions darkening. She wasn't smiling. She was sitting straighter in her chair, her jaw tight. She looked like she was going to say something.

Nao suddenly stood up. "Actually—"

"He's not irresponsible," I said, standing up earlier than Nao.

The words came out of my mouth before I realized it. The classroom suddenly went quiet, with heads turning towards me. I could feel everyone's gaze, but I kept on going.

"Daichi works three jobs," I said, my voice steady. "He helps his grandpa every morning, does food delivery, and another one that not even ONE of us knew about. That's why he's late. Not because he's irresponsible. Not because he's lazy. But because when you're all busy joking, he's busy surviving."

The silence was long, some even avoided looking at my eyes directly.

“He works harder than most of us can imagine,” I continued, my voice sharp. “So don’t take him as a joke when you can’t even do HALF of the things he’s doing.”

Yama, who had been one of the loudest voices, shifted uncomfortably in his seat. “We didn’t know—”

“You didn’t ask,” I said simply, my tone sharp.

The words hung in the air. Nobody moved. Nobody spoke.

I could hear the clock ticking on the wall. The distant chatter from another class down the hallway. The wind from the air conditioner.

Yama was looking down. Mio had gone completely still. Even some students that were involved in the mockery looked uncomfortable in their seats.

Had I said too much? Did I go too far?

Shira looked at me with an expression I couldn’t quite place. His eyes were wide but his hands were relaxed.

Mana was still looking down; I couldn’t make her expression.

Nao was still standing, surprised, but her shoulders relaxed. She's not smiling. She avoided my gaze, then turned to everyone.

"Well," Nao said quietly, cutting through the silence. "Guess we should . . . probably think about this carefully."

Some students that mocked Daichi earlier shifted in their seats, their earlier enthusiasm completely deflated.

Mio cleared up her throat softly. When she spoke, her voice was quieter than her earlier campaign promises. "I . . . I'm sorry." She glanced around the room, then back at me. "About the whole snack thing . . . and about Daichi. That's not what being a class rep was all about."

Mio paused, looking away, seeming to carefully choose her next words. "If we're being serious about this . . ." She looked toward the front of the class. "Shirakawa would be really good. I saw him yesterday helping some students, asking the teacher for clear schedules, heck, even help Mr. Sage with the papers earlier."

"Yeah," another voice agreed, more thoughtfully than before. "He's really responsible."

I felt a small wave of relief. Finally, I glanced at Shira yet again, who looked genuinely surprised by the sudden support.

“What about Emi though?” a girl from the back suggested.  
“She’s very organized!”

“That’s true,” someone else commented. “Emi’s really good with people too!”

Emi looked flustered. “I don’t know . . . I mean, I appreciate it, but—”

“You’d be great, Emi,” Shira said encouragingly.

The conversation gradually picked up momentum, with the students actually discussing qualifications instead of making jokes.

“Shira’s calmer and kinder than Emi, I think he would be better!”

“But Emi is so organized! She helped the teacher organize the cultural festival back in middle school!”

Words upon words, chatter upon chatter got thrown around. But this was nice. Much nicer.

“What about Taka?” Nao said suddenly, as I felt my stomach drop.

“Me?” I tilted my head, my brows furrowed.

“Someone who can help resolve conflicts responsibly and cares about everyone’s well-being, right? Wasn’t that what Mr. Sage said?” Nao said, her voice firm.

“You just proved that you’re not afraid to call people out when they’re being idiots. That’s exactly what a class rep should do,” Nao continued.

“I agree,” Mana said softly. Her voice carries warmth that made everyone quiet down to listen. “Taka cares about people. He noticed things that some don’t, and he’s brave enough to correct people.”

I looked at her, surprised. I was not sure of how to react to what she just said.

I started hearing the other students talking out loud.

“Yeah, they have a point.”

“He’d actually stand up for us too!”

“Dude, finally! Someone who actually pays attention!”

This wasn’t my plan. I didn’t want to draw any attention to myself. *I’m more of a background tree than anything, but I’m fine with it, honestly.* Those were the words I said to Mana yesterday, wasn’t it?

I could hear my own racing heartbeat. It wasn’t that I was afraid of speaking up. I wasn’t scared of talking in front of

many people, or calling out someone in public. But this is different. People expected me to lead, and to be responsible for them. To stick around until the end; to matter to them. This was the kind of attention that meant people would instantly notice when I inevitably disappear.

The voices grew louder, even more enthusiastic. I could feel their gaze on me, slowly frying me.

I turned to Mr. Sage, “But Shira and Emi—”

“Can also be nominated,” Mr. Sage interjected gently. “We can have multiple candidates. That’s how democracy works, right?”

I looked down, then nodded slowly. I sat down, looking at my bandaged hand.

The voices around me grew louder. Some were talking about Shira being a kind and calm person. Some were talking about Emi’s planning. And of course, a nail to the coffin, me being a ‘confrontational person’.

“Alright everyone, let’s vote,” Mr. Sage announced. “Write down one name.”

I stared the paper for a long moment, then wrote “Shirakawa” in careful letters.



The counting felt like forever. Mr. Sage tallied the votes on the whiteboard: “Shirakawa with eight votes, Taka with seven, Emi with six, Saki with three, and Ken with two.”

Seven votes. Seven people actually thought I had it in me to do the job.

“Congratulations, Shirakawa and Takumi,” Mr. Sage said with a smile. “Shirakawa will be the representative, and Takumi will be the vice representative!”

“I can’t,” I said immediately, the words came out flat and sharp, cutting through the class cheer. I held my bandaged hand tightly.

The classroom went quiet again. Mr. Sage blinked, looking confused. “I’m sorry?”

“I can’t be vice rep,” I looked down at my desk, avoiding everyone’s eyes. “I’m not cut out to be a vice rep.”

Shira turned towards me, but I avoided looking at him. “Taka, what do you mean by that? You’re what the class needs.”

“Seven people,” Nao spoke up. “Seven people believed in you. That’s more than proof that you ARE cut out for the job.”

“I have to politely decline.”

“Taka . . .” Mana said quietly.

The disappointment in the room felt unbearable. I could feel it pressing down on me like a heavy pressure.

Mr. Sage cleared his throat. “Well, in that case, since Emi had the next highest votes, would you be willing to serve as the vice representative, Emi?”

Emi looked at me for a moment, but her eyes were something that looked like an understanding, then at Mr. Sage. “I’d be happy to help Shira,” she said softly.

“Excellent. Congratulations to both of you.”

Everyone clapped in response, but I couldn’t help but just look down, knowing I disappointed some people.

“Right then,” Mr. Sage said in a firm tone. “Before we move on to today’s lesson, I have another announcement. Club sign-ups will be open for the next two weeks. There will be a club fair this Friday during lunch in the gymnasium where you can meet the club representatives themselves and sign up on the spot. There will also be club posters on bulletin boards and—”

The classroom door slid open with a soft thud. All heads turned as Daichi stepped in, his clothes wrinkled, bathed in his sweat.

“Sorry. I’m late.” Daichi said quietly. His usual big grin was nowhere to be found. Not even a slight smile, as he slowly made his way to the empty desk at the back of the class.

He slumped into his chair and immediately put his forearm over his eyes, while tilting his head up. Sweat dripping to the floor.

Yama avoided looking at Daichi completely. He was much quieter than earlier.

Mio kept stealing glances of Daichi, her shoulders tense. She quietly tore a piece of paper from her notebook. She started writing something on the piece of paper, glancing at Daichi every few seconds, crumpled it up, and started again. Her hands were slightly shaking as she wrote.

“Eyes here,” Mr. Sage called out to everyone. “As I was saying, club posters can be found on bulletin boards, and also near the main office.”

It transitioned from club sign-ups to the first lesson of the day without me realizing. Every few minutes, I’d glance back to see Daichi in the same position. Motionless, his arm still over his eyes.

Mana got up and headed for the empty desk next to Daichi. She put her hands on Daichi’s shoulder, patting him, but Daichi still covered his eyes, his sweat drying from the cool

room. I couldn't hear anything they said, but I saw Daichi mouth the word "I'm fine."

I couldn't concentrate on what Mr. Sage was saying. I stared at the clock. Five more minutes before recess. I found my foot quickly tapping, urging to go check on Daichi.

"Taka," Shira called out to me.

"Hm?"

"What you did back then was cool," Shira said quietly. "Standing up for Daichi like that."

I didn't say anything. I turned my gaze back to the whiteboard as Mr. Sage was continuing his explanation.

Shira, seeing my reaction, turned his gaze back to Mr. Sage as well. "I saw your bandaged hand when you stood up. Is that why you've been hiding your hand all morning?"

I expected Shira to find out about it, but my eyes were still wide when I heard him say it. I looked away. "It's nothing."

"Taka," Shira's voice gentle but persistent. "It's . . . fine if you don't want to tell me about it. But answer this one question: are you okay?"

"Just an accident," I finally said. "Broke a bowl."

"Really?"

I didn't answer. I didn't even glance at him.

Shira nodded, not pushing any further. "If you want to talk about it . . . Well . . ." He left the offer hanging there.

The bell rang, signaling recess. Students immediately started getting up and chatting, but I found my attention drawn towards the back of the class. Daichi was just sitting hunched forwards now, not even saying a word. He was just there, quiet.

"Should we check on him?" Shira asked, following my gaze.

"Yeah."

When we made our way to the back of the class, Nao and Emi had already been there as well.

"Hey, Puddle Jumper," Nao said softly. "Long night?"

Daichi forced a smile on himself, looking up at Nao who was standing up, his eyes tired. "Yeah, something like that."

"What's Puddle Jumper?" Emi asked curiously.

"Don't mind it," Nao dismissed Emi as fast as Emi asked the question.

Daichi looked at the classroom, wiped his eyes, then looked at us.

The classroom was empty. Everyone had already left except for us.

“So . . .” he said, his voice hoarse. “Who got elected as the class rep? I really missed the whole thing, didn’t I?”

“Shira,” Emi answered gently. “And surprises, surprises. I’m vice representative.”

“Nice!” Daichi’s face lit up despite the tiredness in his eyes. “You both are born for this, seriously!”

“Thanks, Daichi,” Shira said with his usual calm smile. “Though I might need Emi to keep me in line when I’m being too soft on people.”

Emi laughed, but there was something fond in her expression. “And I’ll need you to stop me from smacking misbehaving students on day one.”

Daichi grinned at that, but then his expression grew curious as he looked around the group. “Wait. Did something happen during the election? People were lookin’ at me strange. Was it because I missed the whole election that got people pissed at me?”

“No, not at all,” Mana reassured him.

“Some idiots were making fun of you,” Nao said flatly, glancing at the classroom door. “Calling you lazy. Said it would be funny to elect you since you weren’t even here.”

“I tried shushing them! But they didn’t really listen!” Emi said with a mad expression, crossing her arms.

Daichi blinked, then shrugged with a tired smile. “Heh, I mean, I can see why those guys did that. I am insanely lazy when it comes to getting to class on time.” He stretched and yawned. “But hey! If those dudes wanted me as class rep, I would’ve done my best anyway!”

“Daichi,” Nao’s expression turned serious. “They weren’t nice about it! You got clowned around as a joke!”

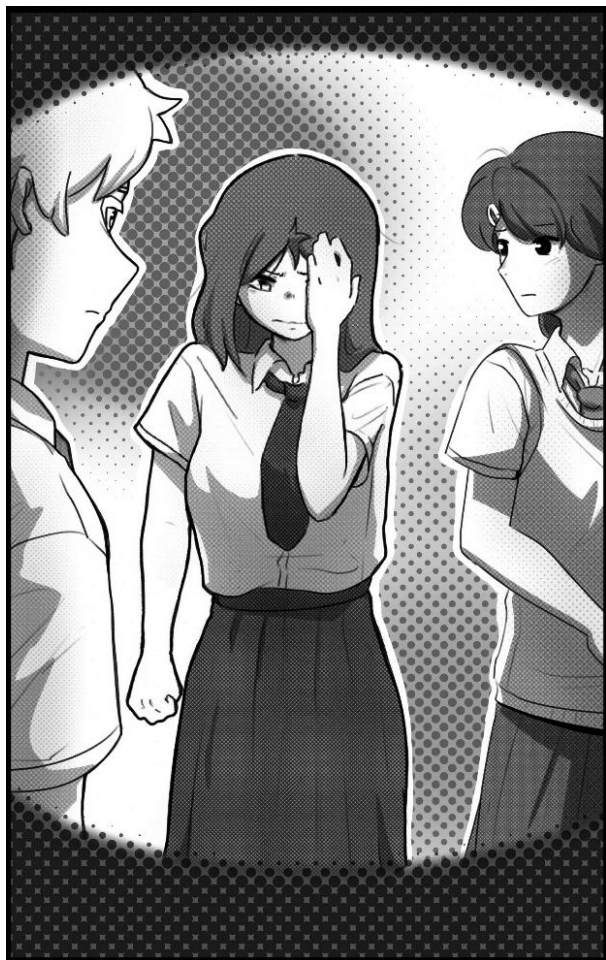
“Yeah, so? People say stuff, right?” He waved it off casually. “Doesn’t really bother me—”

“It bothered ME!” Nao cut him off, her voice loud.

Daichi looked at her surprised, not saying anything.

It was quiet for a moment.

Nao covered her eye with her hand, her expression sad, yet gentle. “It really bothered Mana and even Taka. Taka . . . He stood up for you in class. Told the whole class about your jobs, how hard you worked. Basically telling those idiots to shut their lousy mouths for not knowing what they were talking about.”





Daichi turned to look at me with a genuine surprise.

“Taka . . . did what?”

Nao didn’t say anything further, avoiding to look at Daichi.

Shira, looking at Nao’s expression, answered for her.

“Taka made the whole room go dead silent earlier.”

Emi nervously laughed. “I don’t even have the guts to say what he said! Taka was so cool. If only you could see it for yourself.”

I didn’t like being complimented, mainly because I didn’t know how to react. Emi looked at me, waiting for my reaction, but I stared back with no comment.

Daichi looked at Emi, then me, then looked down. He didn’t say anything. I thought he was sad, but I saw a small smile play on his face for a brief second before he looked down.

“Thanks,” Daichi said simply, still looking down.

He then looked at us with a big grin on his face, despite his tiredness. “Seriously, thank you, everyone!”

Mana patted Daichi on the back. “We should probably head to the cafeteria,” Mana said softly. “Yuki’s probably wondering where we disappeared to.”

“Alright, let’s get you up big man.” Shira offered his hand towards Daichi to help him up.

Daichi smiled, and took his hand.

“Let’s just go,” Nao said, as she walked out the door first. I couldn’t make her expression.

Mana glanced at the door where Nao had just left, then at Daichi, putting her hand on his shoulder. “I’ll be right back, okay?”

Daichi shook his head, then smiled at her. “Go check on her.”

Before I knew it, the classroom was just Daichi, Shira, Emi, and me.

“S-so boys! What’s for lunch, eh?” Emi said nervously.

“Cut that out,” Shira replied while looking nervous himself.

\* \* \*

As the four of us made our way to pick up our food tray, I saw Nao, sitting with Mana and Yuki. Mana gave a thumbs up to Daichi without the others noticing, to which Daichi responded with a big grin and a prayer bow.

The line for food was long, serves us right for coming to the cafeteria so late. Shira and Emi were talking about clubs to join, which I really didn't care to listen at all.

"Yo, Taka," Daichi said, while being in front of me, lining up for food. "What's up with . . . that?" he said, as he pointed at my bandaged hand.

"Nothing."

"Dude, really?! That's the most 'something' respond I've ever heard!"

"I broke a bowl," I said flatly.

"Oh, you're telling me you didn't injure your hand because you punched the guy who badmouthed me?" Daichi chuckled.

Seeing I gave no reaction, Daichi turned back forwards with a disappointed expression. "Sorry."

Before I could pick up my food tray, Yuki noticed me. She did a double . . . No, triple take on me. She pointed at me, her face bright. She makes an inaudible scream, then ran towards me. This can only mean two things: She knew about what I did, or she **JUST** knew what I did.

I blinked, and Yuki's already in front of me, her hands on my shoulders.

TAKA!! YOU WERE SO  
COOOOOL!!



“Taka!! You were so cool!!” Yuki said as she shook me with all her might. I saw the ceiling lamp, then floor, then ceiling lamp, then floor, then heaven.

“Yuki, stop that!” Emi smacked Yuki on the back of her head. Yuki finally stopped, crouching down, covering the back of her head from the pain.

The line slowly moves forward and we got our food, then headed for the table where the others were at.

We placed our food tray on the table, and then Yuki hit me with another question. “Hey Taka! What happened to your hand?”

“Nothing,” I said.

“What?! That’s the most ‘something’ respond I’ve ever heard in my life!” Yuki said, leaning forward.

“Right?! That’s what I said,” Daichi added.

“I. Broke. A. Bowl.”

Everyone started laughing. I couldn’t bear hearing the same question over and over, but looking at everyone’s expression, I found myself smiling as well.

“So, so, so! I heard you guys wanted to go to Auntie Linu’s later?” Yuki asked enthusiastically.

“Yeah, and I heard Daichi here is free,” Emi said, as she wiped her mouth with a napkin.

Daichi, eating his food, nearly choked as he heard that.  
“Wh— I am?”

“It’s Tuesday, you got no part time job today,” Nao pointed her fork at him, with a serious expression.

“But I have to help grandpa, even just a little bit . . .”

“Mana’s sad.”

“I’m in.”

*What?! He caved in so easily!*

Their conversation carried on while I focused on finishing my food.

I took my phone out from my pocket to check the time, but something fell off. A yellow paper.

I quickly picked it up. It was the sticky note from earlier. When did I pocket this? I thought I threw it away.

I smoothed it out, as the word stare at me back. ‘Ask Shira.’

I really didn’t ask him a single thing, huh? There were so many opportunities. So many chances. Granted, I still threw it away.

I didn't want to get attached, yet I still defended Daichi in class without hesitation. Such a hypocrite.

Why was it so easy to defend and stand up for someone else, yet it was so hard for *me* to just ask this simple question. Why was it so hard to just take this small step forward?

Did I even know what I want? I didn't even know my own feelings! Should I get attached? Should I build this relationship either way? I knew I wanted to, but I could never find the solution.

Saying goodbyes to those I cared about will hurt me more than not talking to them at all, right? Right? Please . . . tell me I was right.

I stared at Shira as he was talking to everyone, his mouth full, looking genuinely interested in the conversation. He was laughing mid-bite, fully engaged with everyone else. He then caught me staring at him and smiled.

I looked away.

Maybe I'll ask Shira another time.

## Chapter 5

### What We Hold Onto

The bell rang, signaling the end of today's school. Shira got pulled aside by the teacher to talk about scheduling. Everyone else rushed out while I slowly packed my things. I think people started talking about me. I heard my name, but I couldn't hear what they were talking about. By the time I reached the hallway, most students had already left.

"Taka!" Shira called out to me, running behind me. "Wait up! Are you . . . going to come . . . to . . . Auntie Linu's with the others?" he said as he was catching his breath in between every word.

"Uh, I'll think about it," I said as I continued walking.

"Yeah, uh, we're going right now. I think the others are already by the school gate," Shira followed me closely beside me.

"Right now, right now?"

"Yeah, right now, right now."

"Wait."



I stopped walking and patted my pockets. “I left my phone in my desk.”

“Oh, alright. I’ll catch up with the others and tell them to wait for you—”

“No, you can go to Auntie Linu’s first, I’ll go there myself . . . or not.” I walked the opposite direction of where everyone else was walking.

“Ahh, uh, Okay!”

I made my way back to class, and took my phone. The sunset rays filled the now quiet classroom.

“Takumi,” a voice called out from the doorway. It was Yama. He walked into the classroom, looking down, not making eye contact with me.

In the quiet classroom, it was just the two of us.

“I . . . Hey man, look . . . I just came back cause I want to . . . say sorry,” he looked around, trying to find the appropriate words.

I pocketed my phone, and stared at him, not saying anything.

“I didn’t know about his jobs and stuff, ‘kay? We were just . . . I mean, it was supposed to be funny, not mean. I wasn’t trying to hurt the guy. I really didn’t mean anything by it! And

when you said that thing about him working harder than us, it really hits me cause my dad's always on me for being lazy, you know? I was just being an ass, and . . . yeah. Sorry. Genuinely."

"Okay," I said, then paused for a while. "Are you done?"

"What? No, I'm not— I mean . . . I was just trying to—"

"You're apologizing to the wrong person," I cut him off. "I'm not the one who got called lazy in front of the whole class."

Yama's expression was surprised. He simply looked down, not saying anything.

I walked up to Yama.

"Move," I said, flatly.

He hesitated, still in the way. I bumped his shoulder as I passed between the desks.

Yama suddenly turned to me. "Okay, fine! Fine, I'll apologize to him, is that what you want?!"

I continued walking, not giving him even a small glance.

"You don't have to like me, but don't I get a chance?! A chance to . . . just try to be better?! Wasn't that your whole point of defending Daichi?! A chance to be more than what other people think?!"

I paused in my tracks. The words hung heavy in the air.

I continued walking.

\* \* \*

When I made it into the school gate, I saw them all. Daichi, Shira, Mana, Emi, Yuki, and Nao. All of them were waiting for me under the sunset. *Why are they all still here?*

“Yo, it’s the man himself! Taka!” Daichi announced.

“Huh? I thought I told you all to go there without me.”

They were staring each other then back at me.

Nao scratched the back of her head. “Where’s the fun in that?”

“Even if you won’t come,” Mana said quietly, her hands on her lap. “We will at least say goodbye to you together, Taka.”

“You CAN come. That’s a statement, by the way,” Yuki said enthusiastically, both her fists clenched.

“You can’t force what people wants, Yuki,” Emi said flatly as the inevitable slap on the back of Yuki’s head soon followed. The sound was loud despite her blank stare.



YO, IT'S  
THE MAN  
HIMSELF!  
TAKA!

WE WILL AT  
LEAST SAY  
GOODBYE  
TO YOU  
TOGETHER,  
TAKA.



I TOLD  
THEM...



WHERE'S THE  
FUN IN THAT?



YOU **CAN**  
COME.  
THAT'S A  
STATE-  
MENT  
BY THE  
WAY.



YOU **CAN'T**  
FORCE WHAT  
PEOPLE  
WANTS.

Shira avoided my gaze, nervously laughing. “Ahaha, I . . . told them, but they insisted on waiting even if you’re not going to come. I guess you’re glued to us forever no matter what.”

*Forever?* The word echoed in my mind, mixing with Yama’s desperate question. *Don’t I get a chance to be better?*

I stared at all of them, the cloud blocking the sunset. Daichi with his grin, despite his somewhat tired eyes. Shira with his calm smile. Mana’s gentle eyes. Emi brushing her hair yet waiting for my answer with full attention. Nao still scratching her head, like she was embarrassed to admit she wanted me there. Yuki excitedly clenching her fist waiting for my answer.

*A chance to be more than what people think.* Something I had given to Daichi, and something Yama was asking for.

A chance?

That’s something I was asking for too, right?

I thought about the light I saw in my dream. ‘Ask Shira’. Such a simple thing to do, wasn’t it? Yet I had been too scared to let anyone matter in this new chapter of my life; in this high school.

But they were all here now. Waiting. Despite what I said.

What if it's different this time? It was such a dangerous thought, like holding a torch with fire almost as big as me.

But was it better to walk a dark path with no light? No direction? Was it better to just walk straight until you hit something? Was it better to just walk and walk, not knowing where to go just for the sake of going somewhere?

I'll hold onto that torch.

Maybe goodbyes would hurt less if I actually let myself say hello.

"Uh . . . Taka?" Daichi waved in front of my face. "So, ya comin' or what?"

"Taka with the stare into the void thing again," Nao snickered.

"Well, I'm already here."

"W—what?! Really?!" Yuki's eyes lit up. "You're actually coming?"

"Let's just go," I said flatly.

Daichi pumped his fist high up in the air. "YEAHHH! Yo, nice! That's what I like to hear. We'll make Uncle Kinu jealous with this many people in Auntie Linu's!"

Mana patted Daichi's head with a smile.

We all started walking out of school together, but I walked slow, behind all of them.

“You can’t be too nice with him, Mana! He’s going to become Yuki version two! Shira, help me out here!” Emi said, concerned.

Shira looks around nervously then points at himself, puzzled.

Yuki was smiling ear to ear, but didn’t say anything, afraid to get smacked again.

Nao ran up to Daichi and hit his back with full force, making him yell in pain. “Like this?”

“I think you’re hurting Mana more than Daichi,” Shira said with a nervous smile.

“Mana can handle a Daichi beating every now and then.” Nao said with uncertainty in her tone. Without any chance for anyone to react, she suddenly hugged Mana. “Sorry, Mana!”

Mana herself was laughing.

Soon, they all laughed together while Daichi was dying.

Without anybody noticing, I smiled.

\* \* \*

“HUUUUH?! WHAT DID YOU SAY YOU WANT?!”

“Uh, I’m sorry if I didn’t sound clear, gramps,” Shira said, forcing a smile on his face while there were visible sweats on his face. “We just want a table for, uh, seven people.”

“I’M A WOMAN!!!”

“G—granny I mean.”

She was bald, so I couldn’t blame Shira.

“THE RESTAURANT IS FULL! COME BACK LATER!”

The door slammed shut in front of us.

“I knew Uncle Kinu’s the better sibling,” Yuki said in disappointment.

“They’re cousins, actually,” Emi corrected.

“I knew Uncle Kinu’s the better cousin.”

Emi pinched her nose bridge.

Daichi leaned against the wall. “So, we’re waitin’?”

“Usually only took about fifteen minutes,” I said quietly.

I opened my phone. 6:14 PM. It was starting to get chilly outside, despite it only being Spring. When I checked my phone, the temperature was said to be 14°C.



Shira, Emi, and Yuki were on their phone, discussing an alternate place to go to. I heard places like Uncle Kinu's, Bonki, Tofu's Australian Cuisine, and more.

Nao was constantly re-entering the restaurant to check for seats. The bald old lady could be heard screaming at her every time she re-entered, but she was determined to get everyone a seat.

Mana and Daichi were both feeling the cold, yet Daichi still took off his school uniform to blanket Mana, fully revealing his red t-shirt. Daichi had a gentle smile, different from his big grin when he did that.

"Guys!" Nao called out from inside the restaurant, a genuine smile on her face instead of her usual smug. "We got a seat!"

When we entered, the table we got was a small table for only four people, but with seven seats placed around it. I sat beside Shira and Mana.

"Have y'all decided what club to join?" Yuki looked around enthusiastically. "I think I will join the karate club!"

Nao started laughing really hard. "So you can block Emi's strikes?"

Yuki blushed then looked away. "... No? I like beating people up!"

“Aw man, I don’t think I’ll be joining clubs,” Daichi placed his hand on his chin, covering his mouth as well. “Gotta help gramps. Told Mr. Sage about it, and he said it’s fine if that’s the case.”

“That makes sense,” Yuki said, nodding.

Emi turned towards Shira. “What about you, Shira? Are you still joining clubs? I heard you’re joining the student council.”

“Ahaha, yes. You’re joining student councils too, right?” Shira asked back.

“Yes! Looks like we’ll be working closely together at all times!”

They were all talking amongst themselves. The only one wasn’t talking was just me and Mana, who was focused on the menu.

I took the menu book as well, reading it. The conversation around us, with everyone seeming to have their paths figured out. Everyone except . . .

I glanced at Mana, who was still focused on the menu.

“What about you, Mana? What club are you joining?”

Mana looked up from her menu, then glanced towards Daichi who was still talking animatedly with the others. “I don’t think I’ll be joining clubs.”

I furrowed my eyebrows. “Why not?”

She hesitated, her fingers tapping on top of the menu. “I won’t have time for clubs.”

“You’re one of the most organized people I’ve met. If anyone could manage time for clubs, it’d be you.”

She looked down, then smiled. “Taka, let’s talk about this later. Maybe not in front of everyone.”

I nodded.

Daichi, who had been sitting next to Mana and attempting to stack sugar packets into a tower with Nao and Yuki, glanced over when he noticed our quiet exchange. “Hey, is everything okay?”

“I just want to talk to Taka about something later. Maybe . . . in private,” Mana said softly.

Without missing a beat, Daichi’s face broke into a gentle smile, different from his usual big grin. “Oh, that’s perfect! Really glad you have someone you feel comfortable talking to ‘bout stuff.” He leaned back in his chair, looking genuinely relieved. “Taka’s really good at seeing things clearly.”

*He's . . . relieved?* I watched his face for any hint of suspicion or jealousy. Nothing.

“You’re not . . . curious what it’s about?” Mana asked, seeming slightly surprised by his laid-back response.

“Nah,” Daichi said, going back to his sugar packet architectural attempts. “If you want me to know right now, you’d tell me. If you want to tell me later, you will. If it’s private between you two, that’s okay too.” He paused his stacking to look at her directly with a smile. “I’m just happy you’ve got friends you trust enough to talk to about personal stuff.”

That really . . . surprised me. I felt a knot forming in my stomach from the pressure. They both really trusted me and each other. Well, especially each other.

“Thank you,” Mana said quietly, watching him balance another packet.

“For what?”

“For being you.”

The tower collapsed. Mana laughed, and Daichi’s jaw dropped to the earth’s core.

“Aww,” Yuki cooed from across the table, her hands clasped together. “You two are so cute it’s choking me. Emi, I want one like that! Help me find someone like that!”

Emi had the loudest groan.

Nao nudged Daichi's shoulder with her elbow, smirking. "Look at you being all mature and trustworthy. Who are you and what did you do to that guy who used to eat bugs to get attention?"

"I was FIVE!" Daichi protested, standing up.

"Still gross," Nao said flatly while opening the menu book.

"I think you both are sweet," Shira said with his calm smile. "The trust between you two, Mana and Daichi."

Yuki suddenly pointed at Daichi and Mana dramatically with a chopstick. "Emi, that! That is what I want! Where do I find a spouse who doesn't get jealous when I want some alone time?!"

"Maybe try not to scare them off first?!" Emi suggested. "Learn from Shira! Greet people with a calm smile."

"I don't scare people away! I'm charming!"

"You asked the last guy if he could bench press you on the spot last time!" Emi reminded her.

"That's a valid question!"

"NO, That's weird!"

"Oh, look Mana's ears are red!"

“Don’t change the topic, weirdo!”

They’re all watching them like they’re some kind of relationship goals poster, while the both of them are just existing in the middle of it, completely comfortable with the attention.

Mana was still smiling softly at the teasing, while Daichi had his tongue out, hyper focused on rebuilding his fallen sugar packet tower despite everyone’s commentary.

“Okay, okay, enough teasing the happy couple,” Shira said with a smile. “Let’s order before Auntie Linu kicks us out.”

Shira gathered everyone’s orders and went to the counter to get the order processed.

“Hey, Taka!” Yuki called out to me. “We never asked you about your club! What club are you joining? Tell me it’s something cool like roast battle club!”

Emi gave Yuki a blank stare. “There’s no roast battle club.”

“There should be,” Yuki muttered.

All eyes were on me. I felt myself melting into the small chair.

“I haven’t decided.”

“Come on, there’s got to be something that interests you,” Nao pushed, leaning forward.

“Oh, I know!” Yuki suddenly clapped her hands, making some customers jolt. “What about the debate club? You’re kind of like, famous now. Half the school’s calling you ‘Truth Bomb Guy’ after what happened in class today.”

“People are talking ‘bout it?!” Daichi said as his tower fell once again, to which he quickly got back to.

*Truth Bomb Guy?* I felt my face go flat. “What?”

“Uh, yeah! You know, someone from your class, 1C, told my class, then class 1A, and ka-plow! You’re famous!” Yuki waved her hand vaguely. “By lunch, everyone knew about the guy who made the whole class go silent.”

I frowned. “That makes it sound like Yama and the others are bad guys.”

“Weren’t they?” Nao asked bluntly.

“They apologized,” I said quietly. “Well, Yama did. They’re painted as bad guys because they didn’t know Daichi’s situation.”

Daichi looked surprised. “Yama said sorry?”

“After school. In private. The point was to give people facts, not create sides.”

Nao looked away, uninterested in the conversation. “Good. He should’ve crawled for forgiveness. I hope it keeps him up at night.”

I looked down and squinted my eyes, then up at Nao. “Nao, can I ask you to do something?”

“What?”

“Don’t think of a pink elephant.”

Nao looked puzzled, tilting her head. “Huh?”

“Now tell me, what was the first thing you thought of when I asked you not to think of the pink elephant.”

She looked around nervously. “Uh, since you said pink elephant, I actually thought of the pink elephant. W—wait, what’s the point of all this, anyway?”

Everyone’s gaze turned to me, anticipating for what I’d say.

“Ever heard of the pink elephant paradox?” I said, looking around the table. “It’s also known as the ironic process theory. Tell someone not to think of a pink elephant, and it’s the only thing they have in their mind. Everyone’s so focused on not making the same mistake as Yama and the others, they’re making the exact same mistake. They don’t know the full story.”



Nao stared at me, leaning forward. "Difference is, I know the story. He apologized, but he doesn't deserve forgiveness."

"Then how does it make you the better person when you're talking bad about someone who wanted to change right now?"

"I . . ." Nao looked down. "Whatever."

Daichi tried to study Nao's expression, then looked at me. "Wait, so . . ."

"The people calling Yama and the others as bad guys are doing the same thing Yama did. Making judgement based on incomplete information. They don't know Yama apologized. They don't know people really didn't understand Daichi's situation. They judged people from the little information they get."

Daichi put his hand on his nape, a small smile on his face. "Hard to believe you're the same dude who blurted out 'noodles' when we first met. It was because of my shirt, wasn't it?"

*Huh?! So, he knew?*

I activated my defense mechanism. My flat expression, that is.

“Ironic process theory . . . So, the harder some peeps try not to be judgemental, they’re becomin’ more judgemental.”

“Everyone’s just being human. When there are holes, we tend to fill it with assumptions. The problem is thinking we’re different from the people we’re criticizing.”

Yuki looked at me, confused. “So, you’re saying we shouldn’t call people Truth Bomb Guy?”

“I’m saying we should dig for facts before filling up holes with assumptions,” I said flatly.

Shira returned with the receipt. “Hey guys, what did I miss?”

“Ironic process theory,” Daichi said, looking very serious at Shira. “Don’t think of a pink elephant.”

“What?”

Not long after, our orders arrived.

I can’t help but notice when Shira’s eating, he kept looking at his watch. Mana didn’t eat a lot, and Daichi finished his meal turbo fast, so they both went to see Auntie Linu’s sea bunny in the aquarium. Emi and Yuki were talking about the food. Nao was checking her phone, watching something.

“I think I’ll have to go,” Shira said after checking the watch.

Yuki stopped talking to Emi and turned towards Shira.  
“Huh? That’s early! The train station closes at midnight! It’s still only 7 PM.”

“I know. I just have things to do at home.”

“Oh, okay! Take care then!”

Emi also waved at Shira. “Be careful on your way home, class rep.”

I waved at Shira, not saying anything, and watching him wave at both Daichi and Mana who were currently looking at the sea bunny.

“Shira’s so responsible, huh? Going home when the clock hits the time,” Emi said, watching Shira leave the restaurant.

I glanced at where Shira had left. “Yeah.”

“He told me he has two sisters. One being seven years old and one being five,” Emi explained, then continued eating her food.

Yuki calmly smiled, looking at me. “I have big two brothers.” She paused for a second. “They’re mean to me though.”

“Not surprised,” Emi said bluntly.

“Okay, fine! Was just sharing my side of the story!” Yuki pouted.

Eni sighed. “Shira probably has strict parents. Or maybe he just has to take care of his younger siblings.”

Shira has strict parents? That makes sense. He was also really responsible, even taking big roles such as a class rep. Maybe his parents’ behaviour pushes him to the furthest extent.

“Guys!” Daichi’s voice carried from across the restaurant as he and Mana walked back to our table. “Can you all believe it?!”

“The sea bunny!” Daichi pointed at the aquarium. “It hates me! Like, it hates my existence.”

Mana sat down next to me and looked at Daichi with a smile. “It didn’t hate you.”

“Mana, it curled up into a literal ball every time I got near the tank!” Daichi announced dramatically. “But then, if it’s you, it started doing some sorta little wiggling dance! Like it was so happy!”

“Sea bunnies are sensitive to movement and vibrations,” Mana said softly. “Maybe you were just . . . more energetic.”

“I was being gentle! I was just trying to get along with it.”

“You? Gentle? Mental,” Nao corrected, looking up from her phone.

Mana looked around the table, then at me. “Taka, would you mind . . . taking a walk with me? I wanted to talk about that thing earlier.”

Ah, right. The club. I got up from my seat and followed her.

“Daichi,” Mana called out. “I’m . . . taking a walk with Taka, okay? I’ll get you something on my way back!”

“Ya don’t have to do that! Just be careful, both of you,” Daichi said with a big smile. “Return safely!”

I nodded. I still couldn’t believe they both trusted each other this much. They both trusted me. I probably got so used to seeing bad couples on social media.

As soon as we both got out of the restaurant, the weather was really cold. The cold wind was blowing onto our faces. I got my red scarf out of my bag, then we continued walking.

“Taka, I should really thank you for standing up for Daichi like that in class,” Mana smiled while walking slowly. “Earlier, when we were waiting for you at the school gate, we talked about you.”

“About me?”

Mana chuckled. “Daichi was really moved by what you did. He said you noticed small things and remembered them, sometimes even more than some of his friends he knew for years. He said he’s nothing but glad for it.”

I turned toward her. “I was just correcting them.”

The wind blew cold. I found myself wrapping my scarf tighter.

“Thank you, Taka. Ever since we talked in the cafeteria yesterday, I think of you as a kind person. When you stood up for Daichi, well, it just confirmed everything.”

I stayed quiet, the hum of traffic surrounding us.

“Taka, can I ask something?” Mana’s pace slowed down. “You moved around a lot, right? You’ve seen different kinds of relationships?”

I nodded, not sure where this was going.

“Do you think . . . when you care about someone so, so much, you should prioritize them above your own interests?”

I looked at her. She wasn’t looking at me, just staring at the pavement in front of her.

“What do you mean?”

“What I mean is . . . maybe I should help Daichi. Really help Daichi.”

Cars went past us on the road, painting our silhouettes on the building beside us.

I turned to her, and saw her still focused on the pavement. She held Daichi’s uniform that was wrapped around her shoulders tighter.

“Help him how?”

She was quiet for a moment, choosing her words carefully. “I told you before, right? How hard he works? But seeing him arriving late today . . . my heart aches. I think I should always be available for him emotionally, or help him out in the store.”

“What you said in the restaurant. You really mean it? You’re not joining clubs?”

Mana shook her head slowly. “I don’t think I should. Daichi needs someone to be there for him.”

“What club were you thinking of joining, Mana?”

Mana’s grip tightened. “Music club. They have guitar sessions.”

“You play guitar?”

Her voice got even softer. “I’ve been playing guitar since I was nine. Not many people know about it. Just my family, Daichi, and now you.”

“And you’re giving it up?”

“I’m not giving it up,” Mana said quickly. “I’m just . . . postponing it. Daichi comes first for me. Maybe when things look up easier for him, I would—”

“What if things don’t get easier?”

“What do you mean?”

I stopped. “When Daichi keeps working, trying to reach his goal to help his grandpa and make everything easier for him, he will always raise the bar and try reaching higher and higher. When he pursuits his goal, and reached higher than clouds, where do you stand, exactly? When do you start living for the sake of *you*?”

“Taka, doesn’t that sound selfish? We’re together. Don’t you think I should focus on him?”

For a moment, it was just the hum of traffic.

“Yesterday you said you want to be kind and support the people you care about. Do you define being kind and supportive as constant self-sacrifice for people you care about?”



If so, what about yourself? When do you start being kind to yourself?"

Mana frowned, looking down.

"Can I ask something?" I said. "What would Daichi say if he found out you decided to not join clubs for him?"

"He . . . probably wouldn't like that. He wouldn't want me to stop doing the things I like just for him."

"You know him better than I do, Mana. But you're making a decision for Daichi when what he wants for you is the opposite."

"I just really can't bear looking at him like that."

"What is your plan, exactly? Help his grandpa's shop after school?"

"Uh, yes. Every day . . . if I can. I thought not joining clubs would mean I could have more time to help him."

"You want to help him, that's not wrong. But there's a difference between helping and replacing parts of yourself. Are you your own person or are you simply defined as Daichi's girlfriend?"

Mana looked up to me, her expression really sad. "Then how am I supposed to help?"

“Encourage him when he’s stressed. Help him study. Make sure he eats properly. There are many ways to do it without you sacrificing yourself. If Daichi stopped doing something he loves for you, how would you feel?”

“I’d feel . . . terrible.”

“Do you believe in Daichi?”

“Of course . . . Of course I do.”

“Then believe how he would want you to be kind to yourself.”

Mana looked at me surprised, then smiled.

She wiped her eyes. “The music club does sound really nice.”

“Sounds like something worth trying.”

\* \* \*

We both walked back, but the others are standing in front of the store.

“Oh h-h-hey! There you guys are!” Daichi said with a big grin, shivering from the cold.

Mana was worried. “W-what happened?”

“We got kicked out,” Yuki said, frowning. She was way less enthusiastic from before.

Emi crossed her arms, but her voice was loud. “That old grandma kicked us out because we didn’t order anything!”

“Ugh,” Nao rolled her eyes. “We told Yuki to keep ordering ice water, but granny said ordering ice water wasn’t counted as ordering.”

“That’s illogical!” Emi shook Nao’s shoulders. “They were making money, though! Even though it was little by little!”

Daichi and Mana sighed at the same time.

“Hey, I just realized something!” Daichi said enthusiastically. “We haven’t exchanged contacts!”

“Exchange contacts?”

“Yeah, Taka! On LINE.”

LINE? I haven’t opened LINE in forever. I didn’t even remember installing it, yet the app was there.

“Alright, everyone,” Emi announced, pulling out her phone. “Gather around, and let’s exchange contacts!”

I hesitated, my hand staying in my pocket.

“Come on, Taka!” Daichi bounced around. “Don’t be shy.”

“I don’t use LINE that much,” I said, which was mostly true.

“Perfect excuse to start!” Daichi grinned.

“How are we supposed to drag you to more hangouts?” Nao looked away, uninterested, but her hand was still handing out her LINE contact information.

Even in the dim streetlight, I could still see their faces. Emi organizing everyone, Mana with her smile, Daichi with his big grin, Nao pretending she didn’t care, and Yuki still . . . looking sad from earlier.

I pulled out my phone reluctantly. “Fine.”

The familiar sound of notification chimes filled the cold air as we added each other one by one. I got added into their group, with Shira being in there as well. My phone immediately buzzed with messages of random stickers they send to the group.

I stared at the group chat, not sure what to respond.

“Alright, everyone, I should head home before my parents start a search party,” Emi said, adjusting her bag.

“Yeah,” Yuki said, with a sad tone.

“Is Yuki okay?” Mana asked with concern in her voice.

“Yuki uh, she . . .” Emi nervously smiled. “She got called as an annoyingly loud, broke person who, uh, could only order ice water. She was the first person who got kicked, we just followed her, kicking ourselves out.”

Nao groaned. “Should’ve just stuck with Uncle Kinu’s, I swear.”

“But the sea bunny!” Daichi sounded hurt.

“The sea bunny doesn’t like you!”

“Still.”

One by one, everyone started saying their goodbyes.

Emi and Yuki went to the same train station together, probably because they were going in the same general direction. I saw Emi keep trying to cheer up Yuki during the walk, even handing out a leftover bread she had from her bag.

Nao waved everyone goodbye, putting on her earbuds. She lived in the opposite direction from everyone else. Seems like she was comfortable walking home by herself.

Daichi and Mana walked together. He was walking her home before going home himself. I saw Mana trying to give back Daichi’s uniform, but Daichi kept wrapping it tighter on her despite him shivering.

I found myself walking alone to my own train, my phone feeling heavier in my pocket.

The train station was quieter now, with most of the evening rush already passed. I tapped my card, and boarded the train, watching the city lights blur past as we pulled away from the platform.

I pulled out my phone to check the time, but I was met with the lively group chat.

Daichi: I hope everyone gets home safe!

Nao: Already home

Emi: I stopped by the convenience store to buy Yuki something, so I will be home a little late.

Then I saw a selfie of Emi and Yuki at the convenience store. Emi was doing a peace sign, but Yuki had the biggest frown.

*Buzz.*

I got another message that popped up in my notification. Separate from the group chat.

“Is this really you, Taka?”

A message from . . . Rei.

My heart stopped. I hadn't seen that name in a long time.

“I know it sounds weird, but I heard you’re in Midorihaven now? It sounds like a lovely town . . . How are you?”

Two simple questions. But they felt like they were tearing me from the inside.

I didn’t open the chat and just let the notification hang because I didn’t want to leave her on read. I didn’t know how to respond.

A familiar white noise crept in, surrounding me. The train announced the next stop, but I couldn’t hear it over the sound of my own heartbeat. All I could see was nothing but white noise. Nothing but her name on my screen.

How was I supposed to respond?